



To the Shores of

Remarkably preserved Roman cities, lush mosaics, and an absence of pestering trinket-mongers make Libya a compelling destination for archaeology buffs.

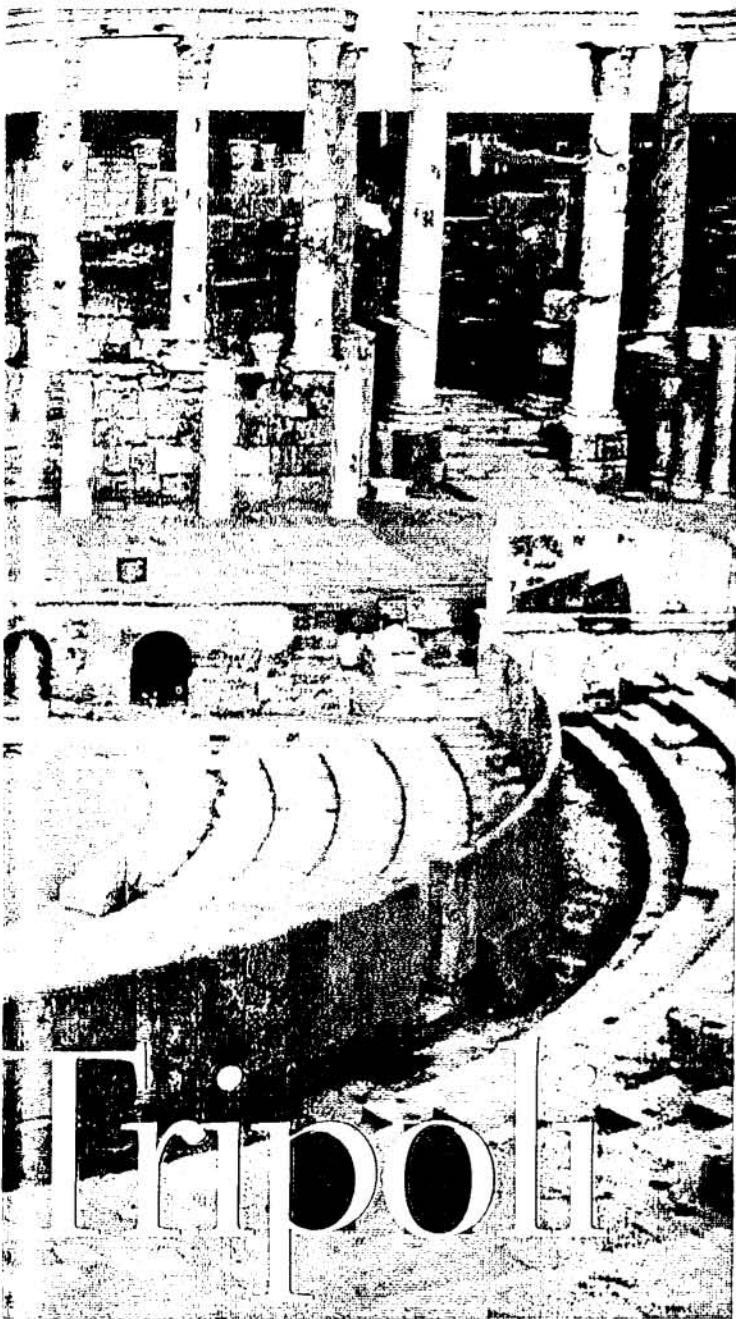
by LOUIS WERNER

OF ALL THE EXOTIC VACATION DESTINATIONS Americans dream about, Libya probably ranks close to last. The place conjures images of shadowy terrorist networks, exploding jetliners and American flags burning in the streets. There's no U.S. embassy in Libya, the State Department website warns, and any American visitor in peril there must seek protection with the Belgians.

Libya beckoned anyway, and on the advice of David Mattingly, a British archaeologist working in Libya's southern Fezzan region I put together an itinerary that would

take me from some of the Mediterranean's finest Greek and Roman sites, to vast pyramid cemeteries deep in the southern desert, finishing up at a legendary caravan city hard along the Algerian border.

Since the United Nations sanctions imposed after the Lockerbie bombing in 1989 were lifted three years ago, Europeans—mostly French, British, and Italians, all previous colonial masters—have been coming by jet and cruise ship, greeted by friendly travel agents and escorted by knowledgeable guides. The infrastructure is in place, the packages are fixed, and the roads are well paved. Libya in



The theater at Lepcis, cleared and partially rebuilt by Italian archaeologists in the 1930s

eration. The French, they report, will be digging soon at the Roman site of Lepcis Magna and the Greek city of Apollonia; the Italians at Roman Sabratha, Lepcis, Greek Cyrene and the southern rock-art sites of Jebel Akicus and the Poles somewhere still to be determined along the far eastern coast. It would also be nice, said al Khadouri with a smile, to see the University of Pennsylvania team come back to the Old Forum in Lepcis.

TRIPOLI ITSELF IS THE SITE of ancient Oea, now disappeared, save for the second-century A.D. arch of Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius in the medina, or old quarter. Rapidly growing at the outskirts and along the corniche road, central Tripoli still has the feel of its Italian colonial yesterdays, if you ignore the triple lifesize posters of Muammar Qaddafi that line the streets. Foot traffic is light, cars rarely honk, and the outdoor cafes only murmur, not hum. All the city's waterpipe smokers seem to congregate in a single alleyway. In marked contrast to all other cities in North Africa, Tripoli's medina seems even quieter than its modern quarters.

Just downstairs from al-Khadouri in the Red Fort is the Tripoli Museum, its considerable collection ranging from Palaeolithic points found in the Sahara, to the world's finest collection of Roman floor mosaics, to a trophy room of state gifts received by Qaddafi from like-minded revolutionary leaders. In the entryway stands the latest acquisition, or in this case a re-acquisition—a second-century A.D. Roman copy of the Capitoline Aphrodite, found at Lepcis, which the Italian governor-general of Libya had given the Nazi marshal Hermann Goering in 1939. It was returned to Tripoli in 1999 after surfacing in a private German collection.

Unlike Oea, the other two cities of Roman Tripolitania (the province consisting of western Libya's three great ancient cities, hence its name), Sabratha to the west and Lepcis to the east, are well preserved and unbuilt upon in later periods. In both, a visitor can trace their settlement from Punic times straight through to late Byzantine. Libya was conquered by the Arabs in the late seventh century. While the grandiose building plan of the Roman emperor Septimius Severus, a native son of Lepcis, put both cities on the map, architecturally speaking, Italian archaeologists in the 1930s did a fine job of clearing and rebuilding some of the better known monuments.

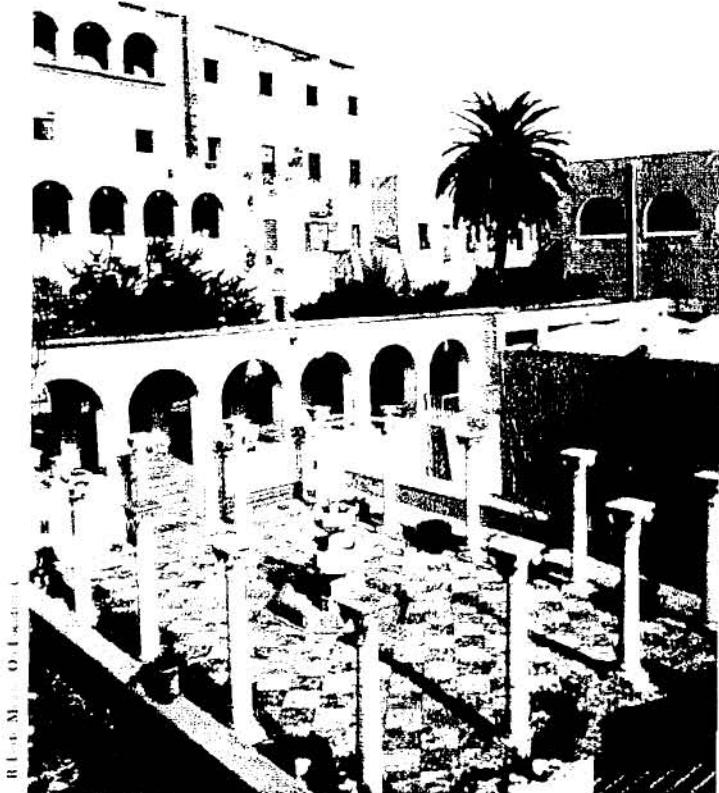
Last of Tripolitania, some 600 miles along the coast, lies Cyrenaica, the Hellenized region of eastern Libya, and its Greek cities of the Pentapolis—Cyrene, Barce, Teucheira, Apollonia and Hesperides. All merit visits as thorough as those to Lepcis and Sabratha, and a high-speed east-west rail link under construction will facilitate tourism. At the

short, is now up to speed with Egypt and Morocco as an archaeological tourist destination.

The Libyan Antiquities Department, led for nearly 20 years by Ali al Khadouri, is also welcoming back the foreign archaeologists who led large-scale excavations here in pre-sanction days. Al Khadouri's office is in the rabbit warren of old Tripoli's Saray al-Hamra, or Red Fort, allegedly named for the blood that ran down its walls from the severed heads of prisoners spiked upon its crenellations. While the fort's gory history fades back into early Arab times, the building rests upon foundations of a cleaner sort—a Roman bath.

Al-Khadouri and his deputy Guima Anag, a University of Kansas-educated classical archaeologist, are enthusiastic about the new era of international coop-





Roman baths adjoining Tripoli's renovated Saray al-Hamra, or Red Fort. Right: a section of the second-century A.D. Arch of Marcus Aurelius in the city's old quarter.

Cyrenaican site of Qasr Libya lies the country's greatest example of mosaic art, at least in the estimation of Omar al-Mahjoub, a 60-year veteran of the Antiquities Department, a magnificent Byzantine-era series of some 50 scenic floor mosaics left in situ.

THAT AL-MAHJOUB SHOULD ENDORSE ART from Cyrenaica is no small matter. He spent his entire career in and around Lepcis, starting out as a warden and ending as the area coordinator. He passes his retirement years tending a postcard shop at the site's main gate and a visit would not be complete without speaking with the man who has seen everything. "I even helped create the Aphrodite that went to Germany," he says in a conspiratorial whisper, "and I am so glad that we now have it back."

Al-Mahjoub was responsible for guarding Lepcis at the height of the North Africa campaign in World War II. German troops under Rommel and British and Canadian soldiers under Field Marshall Montgomery swept back and forth along the coastal road right outside the gate. But no soldiers had time to enter, he remembers. "I had the whole place to myself. This one encounter involved chasing away some British signal men rigging an antenna onto columns in the Severan Forum."

Al-Mahjoub modestly links the mosaic complex he himself has been responsible for



the 20 room, seaside Villa Silin just west of Lepcis, as Libya's second-greatest example of decorative art. Discovered in 1974 by a fisherman after a storm surge had washed off some of the sand that had covered it in depths up to 18 feet, the villa is undergoing final restoration before opening to the public sometime soon. But private visits can be arranged from Lepcis and even in the unilluminated rooms the mosaics are staggeringly beautiful.

The U-shaped seaside portico is paved with comedic Nilotic scenes of amphora-helmeted pygmies fighting sharp-toothed crocodiles, pointy-billed egrets, and quacking ducks. The main rooms have scenes of bull jumping acrobats, the four seasons passing under a zodiac, and King Lycurgus axing madly at his son, turned by the god Dionysus into an ivy vine. In a floor measuring almost 15 feet by four feet, a seven team chariot race unfolds at full tilt in Lepcis hippodrome, the largest outside Italy. What was apparently the nursery is decorated with a fresco of children herding ducks. Even the servants' quarters show signs of elaborate frescoes.

The sea, however, has no regard for history, and a retaining wall has been built to do the work that the tons of sand once covering the villa had previously performed. Without

An Aphrodite from the baths at Cyrene, a Greek city in the Hellenized region of eastern Libya, is on display at the Tripoli Museum.

such protection. Silin would soon end up like Villa Nile, located just east of Lepcis' harbor and now mostly tumbled into the waves—but not, thankfully, before its own mosaics had been moved to Tripoli.

Lepcis' own newly opened museum holds many portrait busts found along the once-celebrated colonnaded way, as well as two Aphrodites from the baths, the mythological hero twins, Castor and Pollux, taken from the theater; a monumental foot from a lost bronze statue of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius; and a stone elephant which calls to mind the same animal iconography found in a floor mosaic in Sabratha's trade office across the sea in Roman Ostia.

Many of Lepcis' 600 green-streaked marble columns along the colonnaded way and the 400 red Aswan granite columns in the Severan Forum are gone, relocated to Windsor Castle's Roman folly or to Versailles and the Church of St. Germain-de-Prés in Paris. Three monolithic columns still lie at the water's edge, waiting for a ship large enough to carry them off to Europe. Their story is told by French Consul Claude Le Maire, who at the turn of the eighteenth century wrote, "I have been working over five months to free them from the sand... but I cannot ship them because I do not have a barge strong enough." It is disheartening to think that so many of these stout columns, hewn and shipped at such time and effort 2,000 years ago, were shaved into thin veneer to accent French drawing rooms. At the same time, however, a large block of unworked Aegean marble, destined to clad Lepcis' Arch of Septimius Severus, was hauled up recently from a shipwreck off Misrata and sits not far from the reconstructed four-sided archway, whose original friezes—now in Tripoli—have been replaced with replicas.

These friezes hint at the beginnings of the famously dysfunctional Severan dynasty of the late first-early second century A.D. In one panel, Septimius Severus reaches across the front of his younger son Geta to shake the hand of Caracalla, his elder son. Caracalla must have seen this as a future license to kill, for just ten months after his father had named both sons as co-emperors in February of A.D. 211, he had Geta killed. Caracalla himself was assassinated (217), as was Severus' grandnephew Alexander Severus (235), bringing to an end this ill-fated African ruling family.

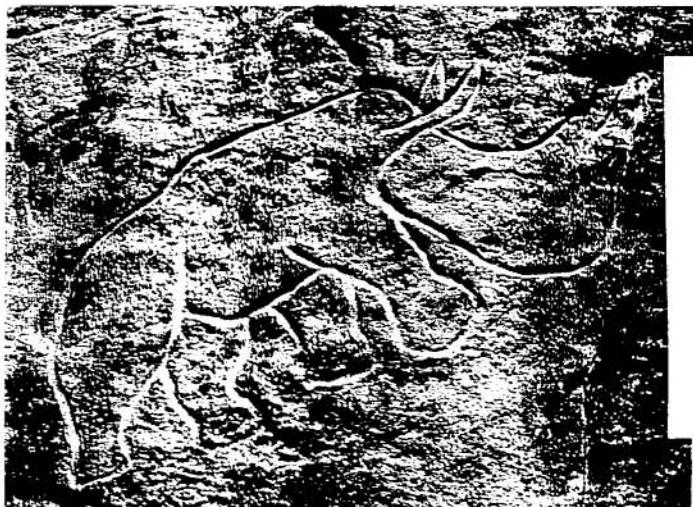
SABRATHA, ON THE OTHER HAND, will always be associated with the lighter side of life. It was in the Roman basilica here in A.D. 158 that Apuleius of Madaura, celebrated author of *The Golden Ass* (a tale of a man's adventures after being transformed into a donkey), defended himself against charges of witchcraft in a dazzlingly inventive oration, whose text is known to us as the *Pro se de magia*, or more commonly the *Apologia*. Students of Roman rhetoric continue to study this text as a step-by-step example of how to charm, disarm, and skewer an opponent when one's own life is on the line.

Apuleius' oration would have been more appropriate if staged in Sabratha's theater, which stands not far from the basilica in its fully reconstructed glory. Pieced together by the Italians in the 1930s, it restores the 72-foot-high, three-storied, 96-marble-columned architectural splendor, built under the reign of Commodus (A.D. 180–192). In its grandiosity and completeness, only the theater at Orange in Roman Provence can compare.

Sabratha's other monuments include baths, fora, and temples. Like Lepcis, the site is uncrowded, extensive and minimally excavated. No crowds of tag-along children or self-appointed guides swarm after a meandering tourist



Quacking ducks and amphora-helmeted pygmies decorate a portico at the 20-room, seaside Villa Silin, just west of Lepcis.



Rock art from a remote desert site in southern Libya.

here so all the cultural incongruities of a socially conservative oil-rich Mediterranean beachfront country slowly opening to the West can be savored in peace. Most conversations with the proverbial man in the street, many of whom spoke English, would end in eye popping surprise that the visitor was American. I never felt unwelcome.

In winter, a fog can roll in to partially obscure the watery horizon, but the lightly breaking surf and brine beach smell are constant reminders that seaside property, then as now, is worth building on, even if its drinking supply is less than secure. Sabratha's undependable aqueduct was an imperfect solution to Roman urban plans i.e. great views but insufficient water. Qaddafi's modern solution pumps water from desert aquifers to thirsty coastal cities.

Like Omar al-Mahjoub at Lepcis, Sabratha too has a local savant living in its shadow. Yusuf al-Khatib is a California-trained artist and animated polymath from whose villa one can see the theater's top tier. Like Apuleius, he takes a firm theatrical command of any discussion. Books on architecture, archaeology, and art fly off his shelves at the merest query. He loves to lecture with his hands—his main point being that Sabratha was Libyan or better said, neo-Libyan, long before it was ever colonized by the Romans. Carthaginians, Phoenicians, and possibly by anonymous seafaring predecessors from the eastern Mediterranean.

Decoding Punic inscriptions alongside the trident icons of the goddess Tanit comes easily to al-Khatib, who retains a Bay-area hipster's air, even while discoursing on Punic child sacrifice. The name Sabratha is of Libyan-Berber origin, he explains, unlike the Punic source of the name Lepcis, and was first cited in a sixth-century B.C. Greek navigational guide. Neo-Libyan, meaning the kind of cultur-ally hyphenated person he considers himself as well as his forebears to be, is a term al-Khatib deviously wishes were in wider circulation.

JUST AS TOURISTS SHUTTLING between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica can choose between bus or plane (until the new train is ready), so can tourists wishing to visit the Fezzan region 600 miles to the south. Several domestic airlines make regular flights to the regional capital of Sabha, but flying means missing the startlingly void landscapes of the Hamada al-Hamra, or Red Rocky Plain, famously crossed by the 20,000 men of the 3rd Augustan Legion led by Cornelius

Bulbus in the first Roman attack on the Garamantian heartland in 19 B.C. This desert crossing itself was such a feat that Cornelius was given a triumphant welcome upon his return to Rome, the first foreign born to be so honored.

The Greek historian Herodotus first brought the Garamantes to the attention of the Western world in the fifth century B.C., calling them fabled warriors in horse-drawn chariots spreading earth upon the salt plain to grow their crops, and fighting guerrilla-style desert warfare that later bedeviled generations of Roman legionnaires. The Roman chronicler Tacitus dismissed them as ungovernable, and his contemporary Lucian said they lived in tents—



Byzantine-era mosaics at the Cyrenaica site of Qasr Libya along the eastern coast. Below: statuary at the Roman theater at Lepcis.



they were wrong on both counts, for the Garamantes had a successful kingdom and lived in houses of saltbrick.

The reason for heading this way these days is to see what is left of Garamantian civilization, its pyramid cemeteries containing more than 100,000 tombs, some 12,000 miles of irrigation tunnels, and the site of ancient Garama itself, near its newly opened museum. Director Sa'd Salih Abdelaziz gives personal tours of all nearby sites. "I was chosen for this job," says the ex-school teacher, with a sheepish grin, "because I am one of only three people in the entire oasis who speaks English."

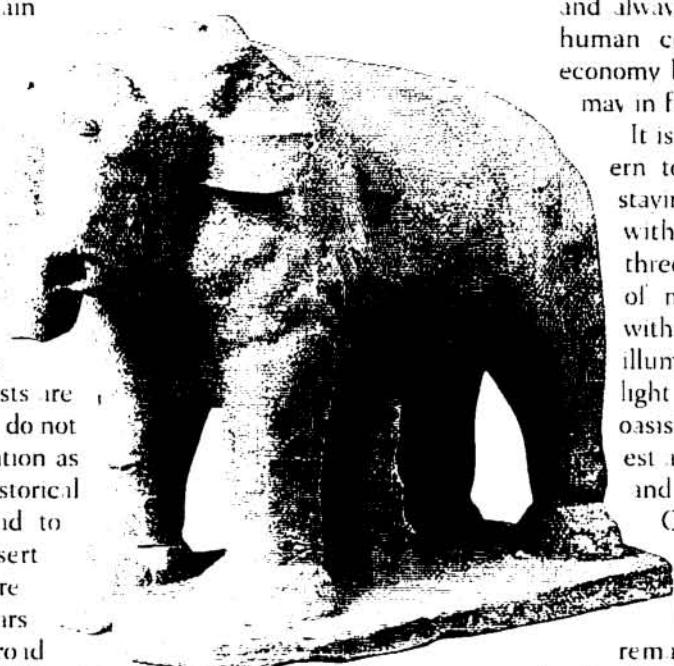
Cornelius Balbus famed desert crossing is now often replicated by adventure tourists, who cross the salt plain and dune fields by Landrover. While welcoming the recent boom in desert tourism, Guima Anag is concerned about the fate of rock art in the remote desert sites, some of which date from the late Palaeolithic. Says Anag, who was recently appointed to a UNESCO committee promoting Saharan tourism, "many adventure tourists are now visiting the south, and they do not share the same ethics or education as tourists who come to our historical sites on the coast. I have had to quickly become both a desert policeman and an expert in prehistoric archaeology." Two years ago, a group of Italian off-road enthusiasts was found at the border with a broken petroglyph in their possession. "Not professional thieves, just opportunistic collectors," notes Anag.

BACK NORTH ACROSS THE HAMADA AL-HAMRA, squeezed up against Algeria's Great Sand Sea, is the jewel of the desert, the legendary caravan city of Ghadames, or Cydamus to the Romans, originally settled in prehistoric times near a perennial spring. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Ghadames is a gypsum-plastered Rubik's Cube of interlocking courtyards, balconies, passageway-spanning, second-story rooms, and curvilinear covered streets, whitewashed to a brilliant gleam on the outside and decorated in red crosshatch motifs—reminiscent of a Berber bride's hennaed feet and hands—on the inside.

But old Ghadames is now empty of people, its residents having moved over the last 20 years to a modern breeze-block town immediately outside the ancient city walls. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has been



Reconstructed Arch of Emperor Septimius Severus in Lepcis. Its original friezes, now in Tripoli, have been replaced with replicas. Below, stone elephant in the Lepcis Museum.



working with local master masons and their apprentices to rebuild what had crumbled and to replumb and rewire what can be rehoused. Their aim is to retrofit traditional mud architecture to the needs of today. The task is daunting, for the town's traditional urban plan of curved and narrow streets is not necessarily suited to the modern economy.

Native son and UNDP consultant Tahir Ahmad Ibrahim thinks it can be done. "There is no better place to be on a 115 degree summer day than in the center of old Ghadames, where it never gets above 85," he says. "People still go there from the modern town to wait out the heat. And in the desert, that is what has and always will drive urban planning—human comfort." As Libya's tourism economy becomes more developed, that may in fact become true once again.

It is easy to foresee flocks of western tourists coming to Ghadames, staying in funky troglodytic B&Bs with flush toilets, roaming the three-mile-square old city, devoid of motorized traffic, crisscrossed with spookily covered streets, and illuminated here and there with light wells three stories high. The oasis dates are said to be the sweetest and plumpest of all the Sahara, and its airport is soon to reopen.

Once the southernmost limit of Roman control in the region, Ghadames, like the rest of Libya, is no longer destined to remain the archaeological no man's land it has been for the last 20 years. ■

LOUIS WERNER, a New York writer, travels frequently to the Middle East and North Africa. He is grateful for the assistance given him on this article by Iman Harris at Wings Travel in Tripoli (wingstravel@yahoo.com).



TRAVEL ADVISORY

Travel for U.S. citizens to Libya requires a State Department waiver (see travel.state.gov/libya.html), but in reality, is much like that to Cuba: the host countries withhold the visa stamp from American passports, and our government generally looks the other way. Prospective tourists are advised to seek information from travel agencies currently doing business there, such as Bestway Tours in Burnaby, Canada (1-800-663-0844), www.bestway.com; and Wings Travel.

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ROMAN LIBYA

Journeys in a
forbidden land

CRUSADER CASTLES

Troubled
legacy in the
Middle East

CHEROKEE HOLY OF HOLIES

DIGGING NAPOLEON'S DEAD



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Photo from a Roman
mosaic
village near Leptis
Magna, Libya