

Lifestyle | Features



An aerial picture shows the remains of the semi-circular theatre and the Chalchidicum (right), beyond which lies the marketplace, and the Severan Forum and Basilica (top right), in the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna near the coastal Libyan city of Al-Khums, 120Km east of the capital. -AFP photos



An aerial picture shows a view of the theatre in the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna, near the coastal Libyan city of Al-Khums, 120Km east of the capital.



A picture shows a general view of marble columns looking towards the Nymphaeum in the background, in the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna.

# JEWEL OF ROMAN EMPIRE LIES NEGLECTED IN LIBYA CHAOS



A picture shows a view of a carved frieze at the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna near the coastal Libyan city of Al-Khums, 120Km east of the capital.



A picture shows a carved Gorgon head on arches surrounding the Severin forum, in the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna.



A picture shows a carved detail in the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna.



A picture shows a view of fine marble columns lining the theatre stage of the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna.

Once among the Roman Empire's most beautiful cities, Leptis Magna lies neglected and shunned by tourists after a decade of war, but some see its potential for rebirth. There is no queue at the gate and only a handful of visitors, almost all Libyans, wander among the imposing ruins at the UNESCO World Heritage site. Visiting the area, a former Roman outpost on the south coast of the Mediterranean, is "a voyage in time, a dive into history", enthuses Abdessalam Oueba, a Libyan visitor in his 60s. Founded by the Phoenicians then conquered by Rome, the city was the birthplace of Septimius Severus, who rose to become emperor from 193 until 211.

The ruler waged military campaigns across Europe and into modern-day Iraq before dying in York, England, far from the hometown on which he had lavished resources. Perched on a hillside with a striking view of the Mediterranean, the well-preserved ruins include a large basilica, a racecourse and a theatre seating up to 15,000 spectators on arched terraces overlooking the sea. Among the few visiting tourists are Ihab, from Tripoli, who made the 120-kilometre (75-mile) trip to show his children a site he had visited during his own childhood. "Leptis Magna is beautiful, the most beautiful Roman site outside Italy," the 34-year-old doctor said under a clear blue sky. "Yet it's barely been discovered."

### 'Neglect'

The violence that wracked Libya after the 2011 revolt that toppled dictator Muammar Gaddafi stirred fears for the ancient ruins, prompting United Nations cultural agency UNESCO to place them and four other Libyan sites on a list of global heritage in danger. But so far, the areas have been mostly spared from the fighting, which has largely paused since an October 2020 ceasefire. "There haven't been any direct attacks or threats against Leptis Magna, despite the conflict," said Azeddine al-Fakh, head of the site's antiquities department. Yet it faces other threats: a lack of resources and government support.

"In 2020, we were finally able to launch projects that should have been finished 50 years ago," he said, listing toilet facilities,



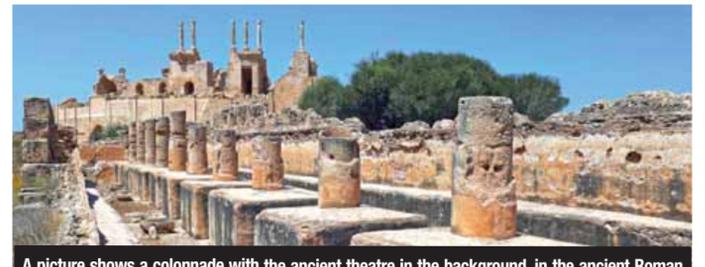
A man looks at the Arch of Septimius Severus in the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna.

offices and a perimeter fence. "But archaeological digs have stopped, and maintenance operations are rushed and superficial," Fakh admitted that after 10 years of conflict and state collapse, Libya's current unity government "has bigger problems to deal with". There was almost no tourism in Libya under Gaddafi, whose rule from 1969-2011 depended heavily on the country's vast oil wealth. Tense foreign relations and sanctions also discouraged foreign visitors.

Gaddafi began issuing tourist visas for the first time in 2003 and even created a ministry of tourism as the regime began mending ties with the West. But all that stopped in 2011, when a NATO-backed revolt overthrew and killed Gaddafi, plunging the country into years of chaos.

### More valuable than oil

Now, a year-long lull in violence has sparked hopes the country can move on. Omar Hdidan, a civil engineer who volunteers to promote and maintain Leptis Magna, believes in its potential for tourism. "It has always been neglected by the state," the 49-year-old said. "There are no digs, no new discoveries, no campaign to encourage tourism. But Leptis Magna is more valuable than 10 oil wells." Fakh agreed. Leptis Magna "could be a source of income if it was managed properly," he said. "It could create thousands of jobs, welcome millions of tourists and bring in billions of dollars. There will come a day when the oil runs out, but Leptis Magna will remain." —AFP



A picture shows a colonnade with the ancient theatre in the background, in the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna.

## 'Ancestor' of Mediterranean mosaics discovered in Turkey

The discovery of a 3,500-year-old paving stone, described as the "ancestor" of Mediterranean mosaics, offers illuminating details into the daily lives of the mysterious Bronze Age Hittites. The assembly of over 3,000 stones in natural shades of beige, red and black, and arranged in triangles and curves was unearthed in the remains of a 15th century BC Hittite temple, 700 years before the oldest known mosaics of ancient Greece. "It is the ancestor of the classical period of mosaics that are obviously more sophisticated. This is a sort of first attempt to do it," says Anacleto D'Agostino, excavation director of Usakli Hoyuk, near Yozgat, in central Turkey.

At the site three hours from Turkey's capital Ankara, first located in 2018, Turkish and Italian archaeologists

painstakingly use shovels and brushes to learn more about the towns of the Hittites, one of the most powerful kingdoms in ancient Anatolia. "For the first time, people felt the necessity to produce some geometric patterns and to do something different from a simple pavement," D'Agostino says. "Maybe we are dealing with a genius? Maybe not. It was maybe a man who said 'build me a floor' and he decided to do something weird?"

The discovery was made opposite Kerkenes mountain and the temple where the mosaic is located was dedicated to Teshub, the storm god worshipped by the Hittites, equivalent to Zeus for the ancient Greeks. "Probably here the priests were looking at the picture of Kerkenes mountain for some rituals and so on," D'Agostino adds.

### Lost city's treasures?

The archaeologists this week also discovered ceramics and the remains of a palace, supporting the theory that Usakli Hoyuk could indeed be the lost city of Zippalanda. A significant place of worship of the storm god and frequently mentioned in Hittite tablets, Zippalanda's exact location has remained a mystery. "Researchers agree that Usakli Hoyuk is one of two most likely sites. With the dis-

covery of the palace remains alongside the luxurious ceramics and glassware, the likelihood has increased," D'Agostino says.

"We only need the ultimate proof: a tablet carrying the name of the city." The



Archaeologists work on the remains of a Hittite palace and its luxurious ceramics and glassware, which were discovered at the Usakli Hoyuk excavation site, near Yozgat. — AFP

treasures of Usakli Hoyuk, for which cedar trees were brought from Lebanon to build temples and palaces, were swallowed up like the rest of the Hittite world towards the end of the Bronze Age. The reason is still not known. But some believe a change in

climate accompanied by social unrest is the cause.

### 'Spiritual connection'

Nearly 3,000 years after their disappearance, the Hittites continue to inhabit Turkish imagination. A Hittite figure representing the sun is Ankara's symbol. And in the 1930s, the founder of the modern Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, presented Turks as the direct descendants of the Hittites. "I don't know if we can find a connection between ancient Hittites and people living here now. Centuries and millennia have passed, and people moved from one place to another," D'Agostino says.

"But I would like to imagine that some sort of spiritual connection exists." In an attempt to honor this connection, the excavation team recreated Hittite culinary traditions, trying ancient recipes on ceramics produced as they would have been at the time using the same technique and clay. "We reproduced the Hittite ceramics with the clay found in the village where the site is located: we baked dates and bread with them as the Hittites used to eat," says Valentina Orsi, co-director of the excavation. "It was very good." — AFP