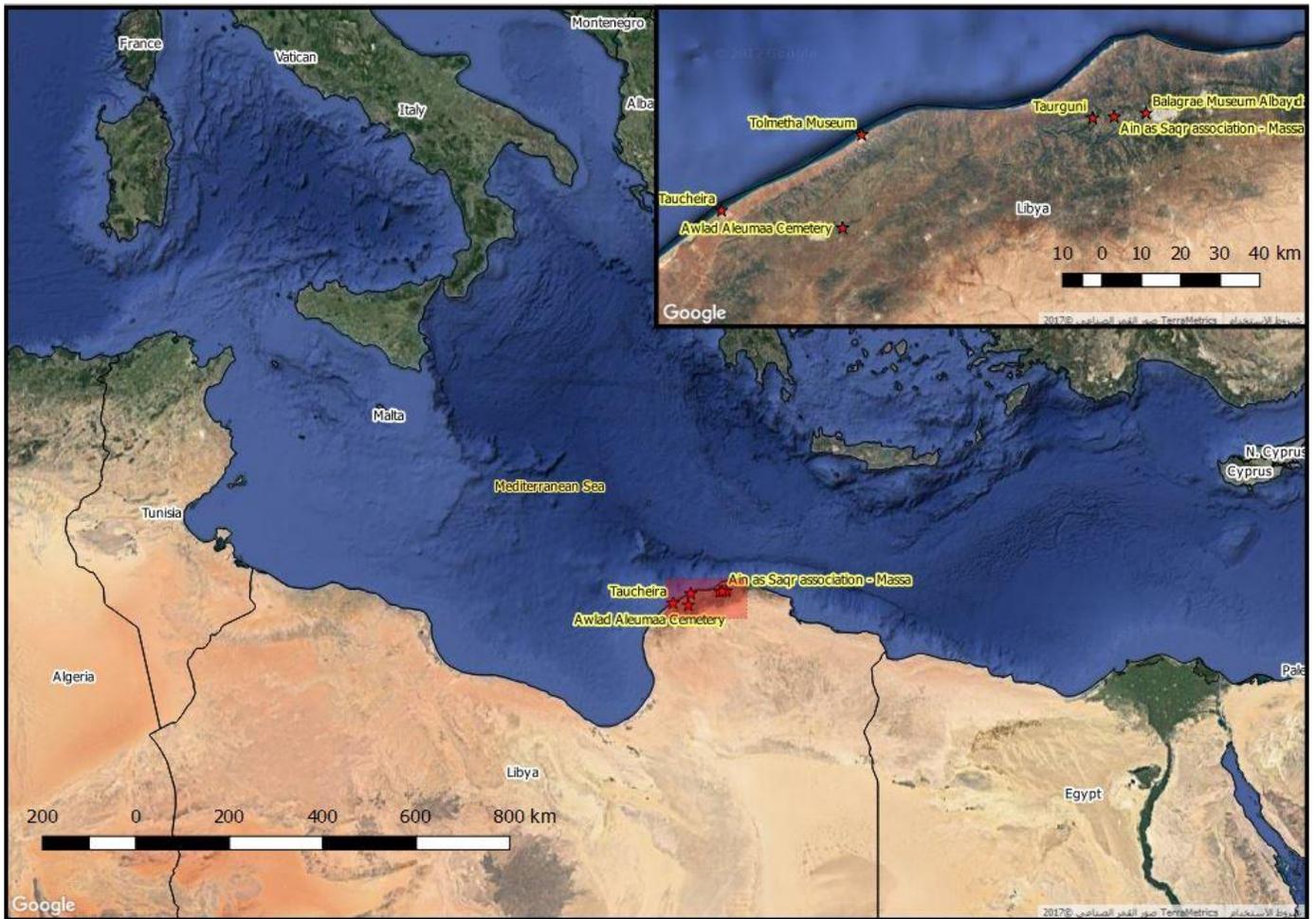


Purpose of the trip

I visited several sites (Figure 1) near Benghazi to survey early Islamic inscriptions (and also collected information from places I could not visit on this occasion), in the company of: Nasser AlHrari, Ashraf Warfali, Mohamed Saad, Abdullah Mabrouk, Khalid Gohary Khaled El Haddar and Osama Mneina. I visited the following sites:

1. El-Merj (in the medieval period called Barqa).
2. Taucheira .
3. Taurguni area.
4. Tolmetha City and Museum.
5. Al Bayda.
6. Massa.
7. Cyrene Museum.
8. Susa.

Figure 1 Map - Trip of 19 Dec 2017 - 26 Dec 2017



Visit to the town of El-Merj; and general introduction

The town of El-Merj (in the medieval period called Barqa) was visited by James Hamilton in 1852, when the medieval remains of the old town were still clearly visible, together with abundant evidence of pre-Islamic occupation. It has been under modern archaeological investigation sporadically since the 1950s. Abdussaid and Goodchild examined the outline of the city walls in 1956, and they were able to see that the modern town of El-Merj, before it was destroyed by the earthquake of 1963, was built almost on top of the ancient city. About this time, too, the work to the south of the site had started, near the Awlad al-Aleuma cemetery by the Department of Antiquities at Benghazi. A British team under the direction of John Dore began a fresh investigation of the town in 1989, which categorically established that well stratified remains dating from the classical period onwards made it a particularly important site for archaeological investigation. The disaster of the 1963 earthquake also saw the end of El-Merj as an urban center. The modern town has been refounded about five kilometres away.

The historical evidence, the accounts by medieval Arab geographers and travellers, are clear, too, that El-Merj was a flourishing city when it was 'destroyed' in the seventh century by the Islamic invaders; but that life began again there soon afterwards, vigorously. The city of Barqa, as it was then called, though not at the same scale as for instance Cyrene, must indeed have been a significant place, for it eventually gave its name to the whole of the Cyrenaica region in the Middle Ages.

There is urgent need for contemporary archaeological investigation of this site, particularly directed towards the investigation of the early Islamic period. The museum in Tolmetha has a small display of Islamic inscriptions from Barqa, engraved in Kufic

script and dated to the third and fourth centuries AH / the ninth and tenth centuries CE, which I examined briefly on the occasion of this visit in December 2016, but this is only a beginning. My research focuses on the early medieval Islamic inscriptions, and I was invited in December 2016 by the head of the Archaeological Survey Department of the Department of Antiquities in Benghazi, Nasser Al Hrari, to inspect some inscriptions recently discovered during an inspection tour to the cemetery of Awlad al-Aleuma (Figure 2 A&B). While at El-Merj I also managed to see the Al Alzawyh mosque, which was badly damaged in the earthquake of 1963, after which it became possible to remove two columns from the mihrab, on one of which was inscribed the profession of faith, the 'Shaha-Dah', on the other a reference to the Khalifa Al-Muiz (mawlana al-Imam Al-Muiz Khalifato Allah). I was able to notice that in the corridors of Al Alzawyh (Figure 3). there are different forms of column, some of them are in marble. Outside the mosque, at the entrance, there was a pile of marble with a width of about one metre and including the base of a marble column (Figure 4 A, B&C). These materials suggest that this was a very important building and spolia from some previously important building had been used in its construction. Unfortunately, I was not able to visit the Aaqabat bin Nafie School because it was closed, and we were unable to communicate with the owner of the building. According to what the Director of the Archaeological Office at El-Merj, Khalid Gohary, said, under the school there were the foundation of large ancient building. I was also told that there had been a large number of columns and capitals inside the school, which have now been moved to an unidentified location. I have photos of some of these items from the archive, however. (Figure 5 A, B&C).,

I also found two gravestones dating from 200 years from the present day, so later than the time for my study; but I noticed the continuity of the influence of Kufic script because certain of the Naskhri letter forms. (Figure 6 A, B&C). The area deserves a full archaeological investigation and a full epigraphic study.

Most of the as yet unexamined gravestones in this medieval cemetery are re-used fragments of earlier classical stonework with no inscription; and the impression of overall continuity was reinforced by even later gravestones. Even stone graves of the Ottoman period, of the type known as 'turban' were reusing spolia from this ancient monument. It is the 'continuity' of the town from the end of the pre-Islamic period to the end of the medieval period, which most emphatically needs to be investigated at Barqa. The archaeological questions to be asked must no longer be, as in the past, "what classical town architecture is this stone evidence of?" but rather "to what kind of use was classical stonework later put?" We need a clear view, not only of the lives lived in medieval Barqa, but of the development of attitudes during the medieval period towards the modern life of the city.

Summary of inscriptions

In El-Merj I have recorded in total 61 inscriptions dated between the earliest Islamic period to the Ottoman period including inscriptions preserved in the Tolmeitha Museum. They derive from tombstones and memorials. The writing memorialises the dead. 45 of these inscriptions I have recorded are in the cemetery of Awlad al-Aleuma, which I catalogue as follows:

Inscriptions in the cemetery

3 complete gravestones, two of them dating from the last 200 years (1352 and 1356 AH) and one without date but which I suggest is datable within the first three centuries AH for the palaeography. The two later stones are beyond the period for my study; but they seemed important to me because I noticed the continuity of the influence of Kufic script in the use of certain of the Naskhri letter forms. The dating of the earlier stone is based on the style of writing, which can be compared with an inscription found on a tombstone kept in the Islamic Museum in Cairo. The Cairo stone bears the number 2721/377 and it is dated 272/880 AD (.Wiet M. Gaston, Catalogue du Musee Arabe . Stèles funéraires Cairo, 1936, vol. IV. pl. 1 no. 1201.p 355). (Figure 6 A, B&C).,

9 fragments of stone in the graveyard contain simply the name of God. The style of writing is Kufic. The dating is uncertain, but the continuing use of an early script is interesting.

28 fragments contain simply a family symbol. These symbols are not ordinary Arabic script, but are clearly understood as relating to specific families. I was able to talk to an old man in the graveyard who was able still to recognize some of these symbols.

5 Ottoman 'turban' stones, contain no script but whose decoration can be dated based on the style. Two of these contained a Star of David, unusually in my experience until now, for the Ottoman period. (In Tolmeitha Museum, there is also a complete Ottoman gravestone in a similar style.) (Figure 7 A, B&C).,

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Visit to the cities of Taucheira and Tolmeitha 22 December 2016

City of Taucheira

I visited the city to examine the Islamic Byzantine fortress (Figure 8) and identify its parts in detail and photograph them; I also photographed some of the pieces of pottery and coins reserved in archeological stores there. The Islamic Byzantine fortress is located to the west of the eastern gate is not separated from the gate, only from the gymnasium and the Byzantine baths building. In the northwestern part of the fortress there are two towers of a circular shape constructed on the decumanus. Also noted in this fort that there are many additions made to the main rooms.

Khaled Haddar told us about a particular Arabic inscription which had disappeared and that they were looking for many years ago which had stood at the entrance to the Byzantine baths in Taucheira. While we were looking over the Islamic Byzantine fort this time, Nasser Hrari found it in a pile of stones from the gymnasium (Figure 9). It has inscriptions in Arabic relating to the gymnasium. This inscription confirms the re-use of the Byzantine baths after the Islamic conquest of Taucheira, in the seventh/eighth century CE, first/second century AH.

Ptolemais (Tolmeitha)

We visited the city of Ptolemais (Tolmeitha) the same day, on which also we visited the museum in the city to photograph the Islamic grave inscriptions from El-Merj preserved there. Among them there also a new, recently discovered Islamic inscription found by one of the inhabitants in the old city at Ptolemais (Tolmetha), a gravestone inscribed in Kufic script. (Figure 10 A,B& C). The style of script is simple Kufic on sandstone. The name of the dead person is there but is difficult to read because the sandstone is badly worn.

I visited the fortified church in Ptolemais. The walls of the church were covered with many Arabic graffiti in a simple Kufic script; and I found scattered at the entrance of the church and on the eastern wall of the central apse some personal names and professions of faith, certainly from the style of writing to be dated to the first/second century AH: such as the name Yazid and the word Deir (meaning 'monastery') The word originally in Aramaic means the monastery "farm" or "house of the farmer". (Figure 11 A,B&C). It is plain that the Christian church had been re-used for Islamic purposes.

Summary of inscriptions

City of Taucheira

In Taucheira city I recorded 2 Arabic inscriptions. One in store at Taucheira is a gravestone. The gravestone is written in a simple Kufic script without diacritic signs crafted with the relief letter style on sandstone can be dated based on the style to the seventh/eighth century CE, first/second century AH. (Figure 9 A& B).

The other one from inside the Byzantine baths was found in the Islamic Byzantine fortress. It is engraved on a mass of stone from the general pile of gymnasium stones. It has inscriptions in Arabic written in a simple Kufic script, the profession of faith can be dated based on the style to the seventh/eighth century CE, first/second century AH

City of Tolmeitha

In Tolmetha I recorded more than 30 inscriptions inside the church. Most are brief prayers for forgiveness religious invocations or confessions. Also there are some personal names, such as the name Yazid and the word Deir (meaning originally 'monastery'). In Aramaic the word means the monastery "farm" or "house of the farmer" and it is plain that the Christian church had been re-used for Islamic purposes.

Tolmeitha Museum:

There are 10 memorial inscriptions¹ dating from the 3rd and 4th centuries AH. In addition, there are 4 foundation stones, with a reference to the Khalifa the Fatimid Caliph Al-Mu'izz Li-Dinillah (mawlana al-Imam Al-Muiz Khalifato Allah), which dates the stones to the 4th century; all these from El-Merj .

¹ This kind of Kufic writing is large, which its great suitability requires, and used to be written with a raised script on solid material such as stone, plaster and wood, with the intention of lasting as long as possible, These commemorative writings on buildings form inscriptional bands or zones on walls or the necks of domes and minarets. The basis of these inscriptions can be Koranic, propaganda expressions, the mention of the name of the person who founded the building and the date of its building. An example of this kind of inscription was found in El Merj (Barqa) or rather what was found consisted of three parts from a frieze in stone which would usually have surrounded the courtyard or facade of the mosque which was established in that town

In Tolmeitha Museum there is also a recently discovered Islamic inscription, found by one of the inhabitants in the old city at Ptolemais (Tolmetha): a gravestone inscribed in Kufic script also dated to the earliest Islamic period, based on the style of writing.

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Visit to Al Bayda City and the Massa area (Taurguni) on 26 December 2016

We visited the Museum of Al Bayda City, but before that we visited the Taurguni area. Taurguni is west of Masa a distance of 8 km, bounded on the west by Aqfant, on the north by the Al-wasitiat area, on the south by the Sidi Abdul Wahid region, and on the east by the wadi 'Am Alssafa' area.

There is a cemetery in this city, in the Massa area, (coordinates: N 32° 45' 2.1" , E 21° 34' 12.3") known as Al Sahaba cemetery. The cemetery contains a number of gravestone inscriptions engraved with different kinds of simple Kufic script, triangle Kufi and foliated Kufi from the third/fourth century AH. Inside the cemetery are six remaining gravestones and some others have already been moved to the Al Bayda City Museum, making about ten gravestones in all. The particular purpose of our visit was to document an Islamic gravestone in the centre. (Figure 12 A,B&C).

Summary of inscriptions

City of Al Bayda and the Massa area (Taurguni)

In Al Bayda museum and the Massa area I have recorded in total 32 inscriptions dated between the earliest Islamic period period and the Ottoman period, graven on stone, including inscriptions preserved in the Al Bayda Museum. They all derive from tombstones. The writing

memorialises the dead. 9 of these inscriptions I have recorded are in the Cemetery of Al Sahaba, which I catalogue as follows:

Inscriptions in the cemetery

There are 9 memorial inscriptions dating between the 2nd to 4th centuries AH eighth/tenth centuries CE, engraved with different kinds of simple Kufic script, triangle Kufic and foliated Kufic. There are also 3 Ottomanic 'turban' stones, which contain no script but whose decoration can be dated. (Figure 12 A,B&C).

Inscriptions in Al Bayda Museum

There are 9 memorial inscriptions dating from the 2nd to 3rd centuries AH / eighth/tenth centuries CE, also 3 Ottomanic 'turban' stones inscribed in Turkish not Arabic, of uncertain date, but late.

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Visit to the store at Cyrene

Summary of inscriptions

There are 2 columns taken from Al Alzawyh Senusya mosque, which after the earthquake of 1963, in which the mosque was badly damaged, it became possible to remove. The two columns were from the mihrab, on one of which was inscribed the profession of faith, which was no doubt the one Hamilton had seen a hundred years before, the SHAHA-DAH; on the other column there is a reference to the Khalifa Al-Muiz (mawlana al-Imam Al-Muiz Khalifato Allah), which dates from the 4th century. Also I have recorded in total 14 inscriptions from various sites in Cyrenaica dating from the

2nd to 4th centuries AH, eighth/tenth centuries CE. Most of these are memorials to the dead, men and women.

Visit to the City of Susa

Summary of inscriptions in Susa Museum

There are 5 Arab inscriptions from the Byzantine Church in Ras Al-Hilal dating from the 2nd century one of them dated precisely 104 AH / 722 AD. This precisely dated inscription is a memorial to a dead person, with also, it seems, the name of the engraver. The other four have simply names with a profession of faith. These inscriptions are difficult to read because of the worn stonework. I am still working on them.

In Susa itself I recorded also about five Arabic inscriptions (sometimes difficult to distinguish one from the other) still in place inside the church, and plainly demonstrating the earliest stage of the change of use of the building, from Christian to Muslim. The inscriptions (perhaps better to be described as 'graffiti'?) consist mostly of the name of Allah, the name of the person writing, but they are not dated. Most of these inscriptions are on the sides of a column. I was told that inside the mihrab there were others, but I couldn't find any.

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Figure 2 A&B The cemetery of Awlad al-Aleuma



Figure 3 A & B Al Alzawyh mosque



Figure 4 A, B & C Al Alzawyh mosque



Figure 5 A, B & C Aqabat bin Nafie School



Figure 6 A, B , C& D The cemetery of Awlad al-Aleuma



Figure 7 A, B , C& D The cemetery of Awlad al-Aleuma



Figure 8 The Islamic Byzantine fortress



Figure 9 A, B & C The Islamic Byzantine fortress



Figure 10 Islamic inscription from Tolmetha



Figure 11 A,B&C Islamic inscriptions in the fortified church from Tolmetha



Figure 12 A, B&C the cemetery of Al Sahaba in Taurguni

