

# IN PURSUIT OF ANCIENT CYRENAICA...

TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF  
EXPLORATION SET AGAINST THE HISTORY  
OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN EUROPE  
(1706–1911)

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translated by Anna Kijak

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Back Cover: Ptolemais, Taucheira Gate, view from the west, 2009 by M. Rekowski,  
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*This book is respectfully dedicated to the memory of  
Tomasz Mikocki, former head of the Polish Mission  
to Ptolemais, my Master and Friend.*



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# Introduction

*La Cyrénaïque contient encore, pour des archéologues, des secrets attrayants et des promesses certaines* (Beulé 1873: 88).

The action of *In Pursuit of Ancient Cyrenaica...* takes place simultaneously on two continents – Africa and Europe.

In North Africa, between Egypt and the Gulf of Sidra, lies Cyrenaica, which has attracted Europeans since the Renaissance. The imagination of humanists, historians and antiquarians was captivated by ancient tales of the Garden of the Hesperides, Lethe – the river of oblivion, magnificent Cyrene, the sacred spring of Apollo and *silphium* – a plant as famous as it was mysterious.

Some scarce information about the historical monuments of Cyrene and other cities of the illustrious Pentapolis was provided by medieval treatises of Arab historians and geographers. Knowledge of the locations of the cities survived also thanks to medieval portolan charts and their successors, maritime maps. However, Europeans did not get an opportunity to have direct contact with Cyrenaica's historical monuments until the 18th century, when diplomats from France, Sardinia and Britain began to appear first in Tripoli and then in Benghazi. Politics was the reason why this once fertile and wealthy region remained on the margins of archaeological research. Interest in Cyrenaica – and travels to the region – peaked in the first half of the 19th century, although it was not until a century later that scientific archaeological research started there.

This work examines travellers' accounts of their journeys to Cyrenaica, focusing in the main on an analysis of these accounts within the context of their significance to topographic surveys of the region. The dates given in the title symbolically mark their beginning and end. The starting date (1706) is that of the first journey across Cyrenaica that led to the writing of the first account extensive enough to be the subject of detailed analysis. The end date (1911) marks the beginning of the Italian occupation of Libya, when responsibility for archaeology was entrusted to the greatest Italian specialists of the period. Travelogues were replaced by scholarly studies featuring both well-known and newly discovered sites, while amateur descriptions and drawings were replaced by professional analysis and documentation.

The main protagonists of the book are people who travelled to Cyrenaica or stayed there for some time, people of a variety of ages and sorts: physicians and an engineer, priests, soldiers and diplomats, artists

and adventurers, scholars and archaeologists. They differed considerably in their education, personalities, itineraries and objectives of their journeys, their wealth and personal circumstances. What they did have in common was great curiosity and courage, love of adventure and the ability to survive in harsh and dangerous conditions – compensated for by unusual discoveries – and, finally, an interest in ancient ruins, which for the purpose of this book is what makes their accounts valuable.

Chapter I discusses selected topics relating to the history of archaeology. In Chapter II a presentation of the travellers, especially those for whom Cyrenaica was the main point of reference and whose observations made on site provided new insights into the topography and architecture of the towns they visited, is preceded by a brief overview of the history of travel against the background of the history of Libya in the 18th and 19th centuries. The main part of the book, Chapter III, is devoted to the presentation of ancient sites in Cyrenaica. It is complemented with a table illustrating the frequency with which the various localities were visited.

The value of travellers' accounts is not limited only to the topographic findings of their authors – they also inspired scholars in Europe at the time. That is why those who incorporated into their studies the incoming information about Cyrenaica, who were inspired by the accounts in question (along with ancient monuments, copies of inscriptions, maps and plans of towns) to embark upon scholarly analyses are also important characters of the book. Among them we will find historians and antiquarians, naturalists and geographers, epigraphers, numismatists and, finally, archaeologists. Cyrenaica attracted all the greatest scholars, who interpreted, explained and compared with ancient sources the effects of on-site surveys conducted by the travellers, and described and commented on objects brought to Europe. The results of their reflections published in journals and books enabled scholars, as well as ordinary lovers of antiquity, to get to know Cyrenaica better. The antiquities, on the other hand, contributed to the development of theoretical studies within various categories of objects (Chapter IV).

The 18th and 19th centuries were periods of special importance to archaeology, in transition from the pre-scientific to the scientific stage. At that time archaeology was undergoing profound changes brought about both by outstanding scholars and by a number of more (or less) well-educated travellers across the Mediterranean region, whose reports, descriptions, iconographic accounts and on-site activity testify to those changes.

Studies dealing with the history of archaeology mention Cyrenaica usually only with reference to two or three names given without any broader context.<sup>1</sup> Yet the history of discoveries made in Cyrenaica enables us to capture and follow significant stages in the evolution of archaeological interests – from antiquarianism to scientific archaeology, pursued by scholars both on site and behind their desks. On the one hand views on ancient art expressed in the accounts, as methods of field prospection and exploration, were a direct reflection of the tendencies of the period, but on the other the topographic findings, observations concerning antiquities and the antiquities themselves played a substantial role in the

evolution of archaeological views and scientific theories.

Let us, therefore, give Cyrenaica its due place in the history of archaeology!

\*\*\*

The names of ancient cities and settlements are given after the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* (Princeton 2000). Quotes from foreign-language sources from the 18th and 19th centuries are given in their original form, i.e. preserving the original punctuation, spelling and grammar.

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<sup>1</sup> In this context the most frequently cited expedition is the one by Smith and Porcher, illustrating the travellers' contribution to the development of the classical antiquities collection at the British Museum. In his excellent book Stephen Dyson mentions Norton in connection with the operation of the American School in Athens (Dyson 2006). The most numerous references in the literature on the subject concern the Italian archaeologist Federico Halbherr and achievements of colonial archaeology.