

## Expert: NATO raids spared Libyan antiquities

By FRANCES D'EMILIO, Associated Press – Nov 4, 2011

ROME (AP) — Libya's famed ancient Roman sites, including the sprawling seaside ruins of Leptis Magna, were spared damage by NATO during the recent airstrikes, says a London-based Libyan archaeologist .

Hafed Walda, a research fellow at Kings College, said Friday that he wants to "say thank you to NATO for achieving precision strikes" during its campaign to protect civilians from late dictator Moammar Gadhafi's regime

Libya boasts many ancient Roman structures, along with a wealth of ancient artifacts in its major museum in the capital Tripoli and in other museums countrywide.

During the fall of dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraq's major museum in Baghdad was looted. Fears were raised on the outbreak of violence in Libya that a similar fate may befall its antiquities and ancient ruins.

Walda, speaking at the American Academy in Rome at a conference on saving cultural heritage in crisis areas, said he had visited sites in the country's west in late September, and all had "so far seen no visible loss."

He warned, however, that "only time will tell" if any damage surfaces.

NATO launched a bombing campaign over Libya in March and carried out more than 9,300 airstrikes. The campaign ended in October after Gadhafi's death.

Among the sites Walda declared unscathed by the bombing — or in the fighting between Gadhafi's forces and rebels — were the port city of Leptis Magna, around 50 miles (80 kilometers) west of the capital Tripoli and one of the best preserved cities of ancient Roman glories. It was originally founded by seafaring Phoenicians from Carthage as a trading post in the first millennium B.C.

Walda also inspected Rasaimergib Fort, near Leptis, where he said NATO took out several radars but an ancient arch at the site "didn't move at all," and Sabratha — another renowned ancient city — which also showed no damage.

Walda suggested that confusion in the country in the first weeks of the revolt may have contributed to the reappearance at an April auction of a 1st century marble bust depicting a Roman princess, which had disappeared from view after being looted from the Sabratha ruins a decade ago.

The head of Italy's Carabinieri paramilitary police art squad, Gen. Pasquale Muggeo, said police are now investigating the whereabouts of the statue all those years. It was sold at the Christie's auction for euro120,000 (\$168,000), "but its value really can't be estimated" because of its ancient provenance, he told The Associated Press.

Muggeo said the statue was seized by police after they were tipped off that it had been sold to a buyer who purchased it in good faith.

Although the north African nation's Roman sites appeared to have survived unscathed, Walda confirmed reports that 6,600 bronze, silver and gold ancient coins stolen from a Benghazi bank vault earlier in the revolt were still missing. Benghazi, eastern Libya's biggest city, served as a base for rebel leaders.

"It appeared to be an inside job," he said, adding that the thieves had apparently drilled into the vault.

He said that hundreds of the coins were recovered from a man caught crossing into Egypt.

Walda — who has been based in London for decades but made periodic research trips to Libya during Gadhafi's regime — said he will visit eastern Libya next week to continue his inspections, adding that he has yet to visit Libya's vast interior.

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