Illustrations by the Early Travelers

An Appreciation of a Lost Art

The following 15 North African coastal scenes were executed by four artist-explorers between roughly 1820 and 1865. The geographic region is shut in on the west by the desolate Syrte Gulf (Figs. 2-4) and to the east by Egypt's scorched Western Desert that begins just outside of Alexandria (Fig. 5). The bulk of the views record the upland eastern Libyan gebel cut by the densely wooded, plunging wadis or ravines (Figs. 6, 14) that surround Cyrene or depict the ancient monuments belonging to the regional capital (Figs. 7-11, 13) and its companion-city, Ptolemais (Figs. 12, 15). Unfortunately none illustrate Cyrene's Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone which had to wait until 1919 before being captured on film.

Adventurous 19th and early 19th century travelers planning to recoup their expenses from printed accounts of their explorations were routinely expected to double as cartographers, architectural draftsmen, and landscape artists. There is nothing here that cannot be easily paralleled in other contemporary travel books describing Crete and Asia Minor, the Middle East, India, and the Americas. But by the time of R.M. Smith and E.A. Porcher's British Museum-sponsored mission to Cyrene in 1860, the photographic camera had begun to take its place as an integral piece of expedition equipment, and the end was near for book illustrations of the sort shown here.

Some of the grander expeditions of the day were made up of entire teams of specialists. When, for example, Baron H. von Minutoli left Alexandria in 1820 to explore the Oasis of Jupiter Ammon at Siwa, his party included at least four people who bore the title of Doktor, including his draftsman, Herr Prof. Liman. Such was more the exception than the rule, however. When Captain George F. Lyon, R.N., attempted to cross the Sahara from Tripoli, he simply set forth with a Mr. Ritchie who had the bad luck to die in Murzuk, leaving the talented naval officer to provide the expedition’s colorful illustrations (Figs. 2, 3). Lt. Frederick Beechey (R.N.) and Henry Beechey were the sons of the illustrious portrait painter Sir William Beechey (1753-1839). Frederick, besides being a highly competent surveyor, was a gifted artist (inside front cover, Figs. 4, 12). The Frenchman Jean-Raymond Pa-chac struggled alone after his companion fell seriously ill at Derna (Figs. 5, 8-9, 13). The British Museum team's illustrator was Commander E.A. Porcher, the third in this series of Royal Navy explorers, whose personal capabilities in this instance encompassed cartography, architectural rendering, and watercolor landscapes (Figs. 1, 6-7, 10-11, 14-15).

We are lucky to be able to reproduce one of Porcher’s original watercolors (Fig. 14). This lovely scene of the Wadi Bil Gadir, painted below the site of Cyrene’s Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone, is one of a number of Porcher works owned by the British Museum that were not selected for the 1864 publication. It therefore appears here as an unpublished original.

The conditions under which the plans, drawings, pen-and-ink washes, and watercolors of these artist-explorers were executed would have been at times appallingly difficult, and one wonders at the skill and accuracy of their various renderings. Many of the ancient monuments plotted on their site plans either no longer exist today or have been severely damaged. And, unlike the rest of the Mediterranean region, the area covered by these illustrations remains largely cut off and unfamiliar to most modern travelers.

Lyon, whose genre pictures have a "primitive," Henri Rousseau-like directness, is perhaps the least polished of the four artists represented. Frederick Beechey’s and Porcher’s works are more painterly and hence deliberately atmospheric, while Pa-choa excels in rather dry, academically precise architectural elevations and scrupulously observed renderings of trees, plants, and animals. The Beechey brothers were without question the most proficient surveyors and mapmakers (see inside front cover). Deprived of their efforts, our knowledge of this remote corner of the ancient world would be sadly impoverished.

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Bibliography

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We thank Mr. James Thom, British Museum Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, for bringing the watercolor shown at Figure 14 to our attention, and Dr. Donald Bailey, Keeper, British Museum Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, for his permission to reproduce it here.
Figure 2
Caravan caught by a sand storm in the Tripolitanian Sahara.

Figure 3
Dismounted Tuareg; the Tripolitanian desert.
Figure 4
Sand dunes and solitary palm tree at the western edge of the Syrtic Gulf.
F. Beechey and H. Beechey, Proceedings of the Expedition to Explore the
Northern Coast of Africa from Tripoli Entwrgd (London: John Murray,
1825), after p. 112.

Figure 5
Medieval Arab fortress, El-Ismayil, west of Alexandria.
J.-B. Paciob, Relation d’un voyage dans Le Marmarique, la Cyprinique, et les
oues d’Auliselah et de Marealah ([1827]; Repr. Marseille: Editeurs Jeanne
Lafitte, 1979). Pl. III.
Figure 6
Camel train ascending out of a wooded wadi two miles west of Cyrene.

Figure 7
Tomb interior in Cyrene's Northern Necropolis, used as residence by local Arab family.
Porcher and Smith, *History of the Recent Discoveries at Cyrene* (London, 1864), Pl. 34.
Figure 8
General view of Cyrene's Northern Necropolis.

Figure 9
Monumental tomb with Ionic façade, Cyrene.
Figure 10
Cyrene's Fountain of Apollo, the perennially flowing source of water that attracted the early Greeks to this site. Porcher and Smith, *History of the Recent Discoveries at Cyrene* (London, 1864), Pl. 11.

Figure 11
Figure 12
The Roman-period bridge at Ptolemais.
Beechey and Beechey, Proceedings of the Expedition to Explore the Northern Coast of Africa from Tripoli Eastward (London: John Murray, 1829), after p. 338.

Figure 13
Monumental tomb with niches for missing stone funerary busts.
J.-B. Pacho, Relation d'un voyage dans Le Marmarique, le Cyproitique, et les oasis d'Audeliah et de Marodit (1827-29) Reprint. Marseille: Editions Jeanne Laffitte, 1979, pl. XXXIII.
Figure 14
Unpublished Porcher watercolor of the Wadi Bel Gadir Below Cyrene's Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone; in the collection of the British Museum.

Figure 15
Jackals baying at the moon rising over the ruins of Ptolemais.
Porcher and Smith, History of the Recent Discoveries at Cyrene (London, 1864), Pl. 50.