Cyrenaica Harbours Project 2025: Al Haniyah (Aptouchus)

In 2025, fieldwork supported by BILNAS was carried out at the ancient harbour site of Al Haniyah (known in antiquity as Aptouchus), a small coastal settlement in eastern Libya. The site was in use for more than a thousand years, from at least the Archaic period (around the 6th century BCE) through the Greek and Roman periods and into Late Antiquity. Although modest in scale, Al Haniyah played an important role in regional maritime networks, supporting larger, nearby ports. Today, parts of the site are now occupied by modern structures, a cemetery, and agricultural land.

The project was designed as a detailed programme of archaeological survey and recording, prompted by growing threats to the site. These threats include (Fig. 1): coastal erosion exacerbated by winter storm surges; sand removal from the beach (sand mining), which destabilises the sediment in the bay, accelerating erosion; and modern development, primarily a tourist resort development in the western part of the bay on top of part of the archaeological site. There are also discussions about building a harbour in the immediate area that is large enough to facilitate international shipping and will require extensive clearance of the area. The primary aim of the 2025 fieldwork, therefore, was to document the surviving archaeology—both on land and underwater—before further damage or loss occurs.

Figure 1: Factors affecting the site of Aptouchous at al Haniyah.

On land, the team carried out extensive recording of visible archaeological remains. This included detailed photography, drone survey, and the creation of 3D digital models of standing structures and the eroding sea cliff (Fig.2). These digital records capture the current condition of the site and can be repeated in the future to allow for future comparison as erosion continues. There were already notable changes in the state of the cliff face from a previous visit by team members in 2024 when compared to our fieldwork in 2025. Furthermore, a partial cliff collapse during winter storms in late 2025 occurred since our fieldwork.

Figure 2: Part of the model of the cliff face (Sector 8), showing numerous walls and stratigraphic layers.

Accurate mapping using DGPS technology was also undertaken, producing a detailed plan of walls, buildings, and other features. Some of the previously noted structures at the site were not visible due to an area of bulldozing activity that was carried out in 2013 and the recent construction of the resort eastern boundary wall. Historic satellite imagery will be used to help supplement the DGPS mapping in these areas.

One significant result of this work was the recording of a large, multi-phase building within the area of the modern resort development, approximately 20 m from the eastern boundary wall of the development. Survey data shows that this structure occupied two levels and appears to have been on top of earlier rock-cut industrial features (that were possibly incorporated into the structure). In a later phase the building was fortified through the strengthening of the outer walls and the addition of sloped revetment walls, which are visible on the eastern and western sides (Fig. 3). Our work also examined earlier interpretations that suggested some features were kilns, but these appear to be rooms of this building that were damaged by a fire in antiquity. Elsewhere on the site, the team recorded quarrying, industrial installations (such as vats and tanks), and architectural elements including columns and fragments of mosaic flooring.

Figure 3: Image of the 3D model of the fortified building (facing south).

A key part of the research focused on the exposed cliff face, where erosion has revealed layers of archaeological deposits and structural remains. The team recorded individual layers and identified seventy-six walls within the 120-metre length of the cliff (Fig 4). Pottery was collected from some of these layers to help date different phases of occupation, with the lowest levels dated to at least the 5–6th centuries BCE, while the upper levels provide dates up to the 6th century CE. These layers and structural remains show how building techniques changed over time, and preserve evidence for domestic activity, destruction by fire, and late-phase burial practices. In several areas within the upper layers, human remains are visible where burials have been cut by erosion and collapse.

Figure 4: Left: Example of a small part of the stratigraphy of the cliff face. Right: Team members carrying out stratigraphic analysis of the cliff.

Underwater survey formed an essential component of the project. Divers focused on the main harbour bay and recorded stone anchors, pottery, fishing equipment, sections of columns, and large worked-stone blocks associated with harbour structures (Fig. 5). The discovery of features such as possible mooring areas and a breakwater confirms the presence of harbour infrastructure. They also investigated neighbouring bays to the west and identified further pottery and anchors that indicate boats also anchored beyond the main harbour area.

Together, these surveys have greatly improved our understanding of how Al Haniyah functioned as a harbour settlement and how it developed over time. The results provide an essential record of a vulnerable site and form the basis for future research, conservation planning, and engagement with local communities and developers to help protect this important part of Libya's coastal heritage.

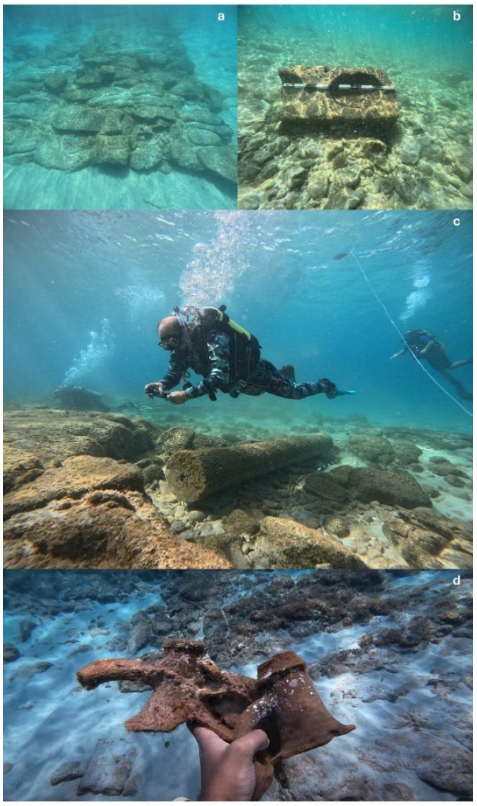

Figure 5: (a) stone structure; (b) architectural element; (c) column shaft; (d) fragments of two amphorae.