Travels in Turkish Archaeology

This article covers a two-month meander in Turkey from west to east between April and June 2003 supplemented by a shorter trip in Spring 2005. There was no itinerary; the route was chosen while travelling often letting the road decide. Edirne was the first destination, off the train at sunrise as evocative Morning Prayer echoed through the station. A pleasant town, it was once the Ottoman capital before the conquest of Constantinople, with 15-16th century mosques, one by Mimar Sinan, his favourite.

Next stop was Gallipoli, the WW1 battle site; a Turkish and Australian shrine to that intense conflict. The claustrophobia of the trenches is evident and scrap metal and bones still surface, left over from the burials and clear up that took place after Armistice. The Turks and Australians never figured out why they were fighting one another since they had barely heard of each other's country and now there is the utmost respect between the two. An evocative museum photo taken in the early 1990s shows a meeting of the last two combatants, then both over 100, giving high fives to the bemusement of the starched up officers. A statue of one, Huseyin Kacmaz with his great-granddaughter in the meadows, is a highlight. The peninsula has iconic and mythic status among Turks as part of the nation's foundation mythology. The military role of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and his miraculous escape is part of their most regarded 20th century political leader's, one of the few 20th century warlords who was also a successful political leader. The Anit Kabir, Ankara, is his most important shrine, a fascinating example of modern military secular symbolism that has undoubted echoes from Antiquity.

While not an archaeological site it is interesting to compare Gallipoli with Troy on the other side of the straight since the aim of both wars was control of the Dardanelle's. The hill and harbour of Troy controlled the strait; boats had to shelter there before sailing while waiting for following winds no doubt contributing to town taxes and merchant profits. It was therefore a profitable piece of conquest until the invention of sailing before the wind, which resulted in its decline as a centre of power; it ended its days as a minor Roman estate. The site is informative and well-explained, emphasizing Calvert's role. Even though Schliemann was more of a treasure hunter, to be fair to him he accepted before he died, that his discovery of a hoard was not Priam's treasure as he originally claimed.

Assos to the south is the first good example of an independent Greek kingdom after Alexander the Great. Aristotle studied there and married his teacher's daughter while the Persians showed exactly what they thought of Greek philosophy when they tortured its philosopher king, Hermeias, to death. It is a typical archaeological joint enterprise between Turkish and International Universities. The excavation is on the main castle site with its corroded sarcophagi but the local Muslim graveyard nearby also has sarcophagi lids; one, on an incline, had small bones and pieces of alabaster pottery lying loosely in the sand underneath. The area like most sites in Turkey is awash with pottery shards, pieces of roof-tile and brick fragments. Here one comes across St. Paul and his disciples, particularly St. Barnaby, who visited many coastal cities generally causing trouble and unrest. While there does not seem to have been any outright hostility, Early Christians don't seem to have been very popular.

Assos was eventually conquered by Pergamum in the mid 3rd century BC, one of the more important Greek-Roman sites of western Turkey. Situated on a steep hill overlooking a plain it commands a powerful position and ended up an extensive kingdom with one of the most comprehensive libraries after Egypt. It invented scribing on animal hides when Egypt cut off the supply of papyrus in a fit of jealousy. The whole lot ended up in Alexandria after Mark Anthony chose to give them as a billet doux to Cleopatra. The site is a joint enterprise with the German Archaeological Institute and one is not surprised to find them rebuilding Trajan's Temple, an excellent example of Roman follies de grandeur and lack of taste. The classical proportions of earlier Greek architecture are pleasing and evocative; one could almost hear the cries of youth in the ruined gymnasium. The signs are useful though technical and one is not surprised either to read that the site was occupied up to fairly modern times but because it was not 'interesting' it was only recorded and the artefacts are, no doubt, buried in some museum warehouse. The Amphitheatre is very steep and has powerful acoustics as was demonstrated when an Australian soprano, in her early twenties, let loose an Italian aria. The aqueduct and wells are classic hydrology. The modern military tank base is as interesting as the Asclepion but taking photos is a no-no.

Ephesus to the south has a similar history. Built on a hill overlooking a harbour it became a wealthy city from the mid-first century BC and later became the Roman capital of the east. If one excludes the late Roman grandiose architecture there is not very much to see. The best approach is left off the main road, left again down a small road with a sign to the Seven Sleepers (but not right to main car park) and entrance. Continue until the end of the fence and then climb the hill to the top. Follow the walls to the end of the ridge and one has a perfect birds eye view of the town angled around the hill and beside the old shore, the sea is now over 10km away due to silting. A perfect picnic spot and it is easy enough to make you're way down and explore though, I suppose one should watch out for security, as you haven't paid the extortionate entry fee! Its founder goddess was Artemsis though St. Paul lived here for three years becoming unpopular here too almost putting the silversmiths out of business.

While there is plenty more to see in the area that was enough Greek and Roman stuff and it was it was time to visit the Lycian Coast between Fethiye and Antalya. The coastal area is a series of fortified strongholds from the first millennium BC (but lost independence by the 6th) united by a federation of mutual interest. Their castles are built with solid masonry designed to withstand earthquakes, while features such as communal wells are still in use. Rock cut tombs in cliffs overlook the most important centres. Some sites such as Xanthos and Patara have been excavated and are now places to visit but many others can be found scattered particularly on the Lycian Way (Lykia Yolu). Patara is well worth the visit as it has some of the largest sand dunes in the Mediterranean, maybe 30-40 high and is about 1-2km wide, which extends another 25km westwards. They have moved eastwards and submerged the part of port and town bar the ubiquitous herd of goats. It is best known as the birthplace of St. Nicholas, later Bishop of Myra, before he was transmogrified into a Victorian red elf from the North Pole. The pokey 19th century Russian church and souvenir stalls at Demre are well worth a miss.

Further eastwards is Olimpos, site of the famous natural gas fires, called the Chimaeras in Antiquity. He was son of Titan and grandson of Gaia; both came to sticky ends in Greek mythology, the father is buried under Mt. Etna while the son had molten lead poured down his throat by Bellerophon riding Pegasus. The best time to visit is at night supplied with wine and food for a barbecue and lounge on the rocks in time honoured tradition. There are some temple ruins from when such activities had a spiritual significance and no doubt the wine was of better quality too, the nickname for the local plonk is snake wine.

To the north east of Mt. Olimpos is Termossoss whose main claim to fame was that it was never conquered by Alexander or the Romans. It is spectacularly sited at 1,250m on the mountain's flanks in a National Park whose vegetation has smothered 90% of the ruins. While independent it became culturally Roman copying their architectural and town planning models. As my unofficial guide, a geologist from Istanbul, remarked, "Even pirates had baths" He also thought that a forest fire would be of enormous benefit in clearing out the vegetation, a suggestion that would horrify the Warden. It was completely abandoned after AD50 after earthquakes shattered the city thus freezing the architecture to that time. While there is doubtless pre-Roman archaeology there is nothing obvious before 100BC.

Ten km further north on a cliff face overlooking the estuarine plain to the south is Karian Cave, one of the oldest occupied in Turkey dating back to the Mousterian period over 25,000 years ago. It is an evocative place when one tries to imagine Neanderthals and early humans foraging hunting, surviving so long ago. There is one vague sort of a carving of a face on a pillar but is otherwise undecorated. It has been excavated over the last 60 years from Early Christian levels down and this has created a spoil heap, which is used as a platform in front of the cave. The quality of the excavation is thrown into doubt by the casual find of a large mammal tooth, bone scrapers and knapper's waste, though no obsidian, while scrabbling around in the loose dirt. There is an excellent museum.

In central Cappadocia lies Konya situated in an old river plain. It is famous as a Sunni pilgrimage site dedicated to the Muslim saint, Rumi, and home of the Whirling Dervish movement. Ataturk is possibly least popular here since he destroyed their power and confiscated their lands on their suppression after Independence. It has an odd feel as a tourist pilgrimage centre; supposedly very conservative but is the only place that I saw a man hit a woman, his girlfriend, in public (usually the preserve of riot police). It has many historic mosques and the Mevlana museum is small but highly ornate and has, allegedly, a lock of Muhammad's beard in a glass case that is continually kissed by women who pray intensely and then take

photos. It is somewhat bizarre given the Islamic injunction against superstitions. The solo flute contemplative music is well worth buying.

About 50km to the southeast is Catal Huyuk one of the earliest villages of any size, 7,500-8,500 years old. The inhabitants were hunter-foragers with knowledge of metalworking in copper and lead and have achieved somewhat iconic status among archaeologists. It is situated on the flat Konya plain and is ringed by high mountains on the distant dusty horizon. Originally a river plain it has undergone desertification though significant water is found in underground rivers now heavily exploited by wells and irrigation. It is a very large tel occupying around 8-10 acres and has built up to a height of perhaps 20m. Excavations over the last 50 years have reached the original surface and the 1,000-year occupancy shows a several levels of evolving sophisticated culture. Recently changes in water table levels have forced excavators to undertake rescue archaeology. The partner Universities come from Berkeley, Poznan and Thessalonica, the last is an interesting development given recent history between Greece and Turkey and is an indication of the rapprochement since the Yalova earthquake, 1999. Of course this pre-historic period is well before any contentious issues. It has a good museum though is still in development. One interesting aspect are the comments of the local female workforce as they sought to understand the practicalities of water, food preparation and storage, whether they could recognize any techniques in use today (they weren't sure) and grappling with a non-Islamic world view. They felt links with the land's ancestors aided by a positive excavation policy that encouraged debate and understanding. However there was nothing on metalworking or the settlement's context. In the 10km between there and the nearest town, Chumra, there are about another 4-5 tels in view, some with modern villages, so Catal Huyuk is not an isolated settlement but part of a major community. It would have been fascinating to see some maps of the range and extent of tel settlements on the plain with possible economic and cultural ties.

Central Anatolia is best known for its pre-Islamic Christian monasteries and underground towns dug out of volcanic tufa. The Ilhara Gorge is one example of a number of cave churches and monasteries down the 10km valley, these are fun to explore but avoid weekends when it is very popular with noisy local bus tours. Unfortunately the surviving religious murals have been almost defaced with graffiti and it is a pity that the security staff who are so assiduous in collecting the entry fees don't protect the paintings. This 'Ahmed loves Sera – 2002' is typical of Turkish attitudes to their heritage and is found all over the country. Turkish identity dates from the Wars of Independence of the 1920s; the only past that is respected and untouched are statues of Ataturk, everything before him is fair game. The tuff cone and cliff landscapes of Cappadocia is surrealistic but has fascinating Early Christian monasteries carved out of the rock with chambers, rooms and tunnels, cool in the baking summer and very defensive. The underground towns go down many levels and may be very old but continuous excavation over 2,000 years has destroyed earlier evidence. Goreme is a good base for exploring the countryside; some nearby conservative villages (no tile or card games in the chai shop) are completely isolated from tourism.

In the northern mountains there are ruins from many periods, the most famous being Hattusha, the impressive Hittite capital. These Indo-Europeans invaded around 2000BC and controlled a very large empire until c. 1250BC, it then fell prey to Phrygians and Assyrians. The archaeology in Turkey is a testament to the rise and fall of empires; ruined castles and palaces lie strewn in strategic spots mostly modernized but others like Hattusha lie stranded in isolation. It has an open air temple with carved galleries of their Gods; inscribed hieroglyphics tell how wonderful the king was, according to himself. In more modern times Amasya was a major centre of the Pontic kingdom, which succeeded Alexander's Empire and survived to make their own until conquered by the Romans around 50BC. Strabo was born here in 63BC; his first view of the world was a narrow gorge with cliffs of 500m surmounted by a fortress. It has excellent examples of Ottoman architecture like many towns around. Safronbolu, 100 miles north of Ankara, has the cream of timber houses from wealthy bakers and at the other extreme Tokat has a timber-housed suburb, untouched by redevelopment due to very basic living standards, many Afghan refugees live here. Amasya has a beautiful selection of medieval mosques and medresses; the museum has the gory dried out corpses of an 11th century military commander, wife and two young children. The road from Hattusha to Amasya passes through Corum, the chickpea capital of Turkey, where chickpeas are available in a bewildering variety of types and concoctions including chocolate coated.

Eastern Turkey is another land. The Kashgar range reach 4,000m in the north, Mount Ararat of Biblical fame dominates the centre while Lake Van and Hakkari are to the south, the last is not recommended for security reasons. The area east of Kashgar is ethnically mixed having been the frontier of Georgia, Armenia and Russia at different times though the best known are the Laz and Hemsin who are struggling to maintain their identity and language amidst Turkish hegemony. It has a mixed dramatic landscape of rolling plateaus, replete with herds of up to 1,000 sheep, shepherds and their fearsome Kangol dogs during the summer, the winters being snowbound, narrow gorges with the echoing sound of rushing water, tributaries to the Coruh, fills the air, upland meadows, summer villages, Georgian churches and glaciers. Yusufeli is a good base for exploration and one can also stay in nearby Barhal and Tikkale valleys. The latter has a dramatic walk past a cathedral up a steep valley to a small church on a knoll both over 1,000 years old. Unfortunately they have suffered recent tomb robbers and the bones of saintly founders are strewn around a spoil heap from under the altar's foundation. I suggested to local people that it would be a mark of respect to rebury the bones but don't know if the point got across, it wasn't seen as an issue. The wooden houses have three stories for animals, residence and food drying and have only recently been connected to electricity. In common with elsewhere settlements with no electricity have been abandoned as people migrate to modern conveniences and the school bus. The exception are summer villages over 3,000m high in the valleys under the glaciers that are two stories and very basic. They can be sizable with up to 75 houses. One needs good weather for visiting though there is nothing like the drama of a mountain top enveloped with black cloud and crashing with thunder if one takes the risk of lightning strike.

To the east the scenic road to Kars climb the valleys to multi coloured lava formations and the high plateau. The town is a mess particularly when it rains. Nearby is the famed site of Ani that is as fascinating for its modern setting as its history. In the 10-11th centuries it rivalled Constantinople in fame and size, as it was a major player in medieval Asian trade. However from 1200 it declined due to shifting trade routes, Mongol invasions, earthquake and fire and was abandoned soon after. The site within the walls has waves of grass-covered streets and overgrown foundations with a few churches some; have frescoes with the usual vandalism, most paintings are destroyed. Intriguing is a church dedicated to St. Patrick, apparently a variant of Patriarch. Ani is beside a river on the frontier between Turkey and Armenia and is a major security zone. To visit one needs to get permission and hire a taxi to take you there and back. Even though there is a village there is no accommodation or shop, the local people make no money from tourism, except for the souvenirs they dig illegally. The site is enclosed by a 3m high metal fence and is used as a military frontier outpost. Cameras are not allowed and there is a full time military presence studying the stone quarry on the other side with binoculars. In the distance the Armenian frontier post is visible. Underneath in the river's ravine caves, similar to Cappadocia, can be seen but are completely off-limits. The extremely bad relationship between the two countries comes from the Armenians siding with the Russian during the War of Independence; Kars was once a Russian town. As a result Ani is being allowed to disintegrate whereas if it were on the other side of the river it would be a World Heritage Site. Should the two countries ever seek a rapprochement Ani would be ideal neutral object of co-operation, hopefully before it is completely vandalized.

Mount Ararat dominates the central frontier overlooking the pass that leads into Iran. It has many reworked fortifications dating back to the little known Urartian empire of Van of the first millennium BC and also the restored castle of Ishak Pasa Sarayi, 1680-1780, a Kurd kingdom. It has been the scene of many Ark seekers who are absurdly convinced that it must survive and one loopy US American has identified it as a rock that vaguely looks like a boat. More scientifically real is a hole in the ground – a nearby meteor crater. It is possible to climb Ararat, 5,137m, with guides on a round trip of four days to allow acclimatization; a group of 18 blind Belgians went to the top in 2002. On the way one can see abandoned villages that were cleared by Turkish military as a security measure during the civil war. At that time local authorities were still repressive and their harassment affected the livelihoods of many, including a local widows and orphan's textile co-operative where I bought a carpet hush-hush; they had to sneak it out so that the army and police wouldn't find out. Overall, the relationship was improving but they still needed to appeal to Ankara. The local communities were positive to the current Prime Minister, T. Erdogan, though were well aware of the contribution by EU to the improvement of their rights such as the introduction of Kurdish schools. Since then there has been progress and setbacks.

To the south the towns of Mardin, Midyat, and Urfa attract with their history and fascinating architecture. The former have two Syrian monasteries close by at Deyrul Zafaran and Morgabriel. After recent difficult times with Islamic extremists they appear to have turned the corner and are both popular destinations with school and other trips though teenagers are a whole lot more interested in which football team I supported[1] which, with having my photo taken with delectable teenagers, was a bit embarrassing in the middle of a history lecture in Morgabriel's church. Interesting were the 'bullaun' stones in the grounds outside. Deyrul is fascinating particularly if is approached by from the back by the overlooking hills that have many ruins of earlier monastic buildings on and around the summit. The monastery below is a bit claustrophobic especially when full of day-trippers. Near Urfa is the beehive town of Harran, completely commercialized and undergoing fundamental changes through irrigation that is changing the countryside from bleak dry desert to cash crops. Only Harran's name and association with Abraham are attractive, more interesting is Urfa's history, architecture and the many Iranian pilgrims taking the long way around on Hadj to Makkah. There are always a few pilgrim buses parked outside Golbasi, another of Abraham sites, completely self-sufficient with cooking and sleeping arrangements.

One of the most spectacular places in Turkey must be Hasankeyf, located strategically on a ford over the Tigris River. It is a cave city been continuously occupied for over 6,000 years with many traces of ancient civilizations in its 4,000 plus caves that dot he mountains around. The main mount itself is multi-period containing overlays of time, culture and spirituality and one can spend many pleasant days wandering around, unhassled by entrance fees, bureaucracy, guides, beggars and other chancers, admiring the scenery, pottering around caves and houses recreating peoples lives and occupations, some occupied to 100 years ago and still in use as animal pens. The valleys nearby are settled with surprisingly fertile farm villages at higher altitudes and one can relax by the river in the waterside fish restaurants.

On the southern coast industrialization and tourism has overlain most of the archaeology though the port resort towns have castles, walls, miscellaneous old buildings and museums. One of the best places is on the recently developed coast road at Anamur. It was founded by the Phoenician and flourished in the Roman and Byzantium period, but was abandoned 7th century due to Islamic pirates. While treasure hunters have been at work here the town was left untouched since abandonment because further settlement took place further east. One can spend many pleasant hours wandering around, further up the cliff are the city walls with more ruins and a modern lighthouse. On the beach remnants of the harbour survive and is the best route to enter the site since it is also free.

Of course Istanbul, that beautiful but dangerous city, is also wonderful and but was better appreciated for having gone their last and knowing a few Turkish words (much appreciated by Istanbul merchants and worth at least a 10% discount). In terms of security you need to have eyes in the back of your head. I know this from having had my wallet pick-pocketed on the tram from the airport, leaving me with €10 and no passport. Be careful with the stray harbour dogs, some are psychotic. I was bitten by one and discovered that many dogs are inoculated against rabies while vaccines for everybody are free at all health centres.

Take Turkey Yavash, Yavash… Tamam!

[1] Galatasaray? Given the Galatians allegedly were originally Celts, we should stick together; but do any Celts play for them now?