

The Amorium Excavations Project: a progress report

Chris Lightfoot | Metropolitan Museum of Art

The site of Amorium was first identified by Richard Pococke as long ago as 1739, and its history has excited considerable interest among antiquarians, historians, epigraphers and topographers, especially during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was, however, not until 1987 that an archaeological team, led by the late Professor R.M. Harrison of Oxford University, began work at the site. His main interest was the investigation of the Byzantine period when Amorium reached the height of its fame and fortune. A major event in its history was the siege and sack of the city in August AD 838 by the armies of the Abbasid caliph, al-Mu'tašim. This, too, has intrigued the team of archaeologists working at the site, especially as even in the very first years of excavation traces of burning and destruction were recorded. Now, after 20 seasons of digging, accumulated evidence from various parts of the site points unmistakably to the fact that these destruction layers relate to the Arab attack in AD 838. Nowhere has this been so clearly and vividly illustrated as in the so-called Enclosure at the centre of the site, where during the 2008 season the remains of two bodies — apparently victims of the siege — were unearthed and 16 large copper alloy folles, all of the emperor Theophilus (r. AD 829–842), were recovered from the floor of a nearby room.

In 2009 excavations in another area, the Lower City Church, were brought to a successful conclusion. Work here began under Martin Harrison in 1990 and initially only the main body of the church was dug. Since 2002, however, the excavations have been expanded to reveal a baptistery, part of the west atrium, various other annexes and subsidiary rooms, and an extensive cemetery, including an area to the east of the baptistery that was reserved for the burial of children and infants. In total, over 130 tombs of the 10th and 11th centuries have been uncovered, and astonishingly, given the reuse of the church as a Seljuk farmhouse and its modern



Male victim from the sack of Amorium in AD 838, as found in the middle of a street during the 2008 season

pillaging for stone, only a very small number of them had been disturbed. Amorium has therefore produced a wealth of material, both anthropological and archaeological, relating to middle Byzantine burials. The most remarkable finds are undoubtedly the remains of silk garments and leather slippers found in a number of tombs. These rich and prestigious tombs also testify to the continued wealth and importance of the city after 838, a fact that is not clearly attested in the literary sources.

Although the Enclosure and Church have been the focus of the excavations during the past decade, other areas of the site and various aspects of its history have also been the subject of research. Amorium offers both a long time-span (from the Hellenistic tumulus to the west of the city to the Ottoman housing on the Upper City mound) and a broad sweep of subject matter (from brick stamps to gold jewellery). Many individual finds have provided a challenge to traditional dating and identification. So, the first example of a previously unknown type of Byzantine anonymous bronze follis was recovered from the Upper City in 1994. Likewise, the documentation of the use of polychromy and of rare pigments on middle Byzantine architectural sculpture was another first for Amorium. Initially, experts dismissed the identification of early ninth century dichroic glass at Amorium, although it was later confirmed by scientific analysis. Most importantly, however, the site is beginning to provide chronological and typological sequences for pottery, glass and metalwork that shed invaluable new light on the material culture of the Byzantine period between the seventh and 11th century.



Fragment of Byzantine Amorium Glazed Ware, found during excavations at the Lower City Church

In 2009 a group of Greek archaeologists and surveyors, sponsored by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, started to reinvestigate the so-called Large Building in the Lower City that had been partially excavated by Martin Harrison's team in 1988–1989. The intention is to complete the work, drawing on the accumulated knowledge of the site's stratigraphy and finds, in order to provide a more precise date for the building and an explanation of its function in Byzantine times.

A new project is now being planned for the coming seasons in which attention will again be paid to the Upper City. Excavations there ceased in 1996 as efforts were concentrated on the Enclosure and Church. It is hoped that a team from Ankara University will lead the new work, focusing on an area that may contain a small late medieval

fort. By the 16th century the site had evidently lost its association with the ancient and Byzantine name of Amorium and can be identified in Ottoman records as Hisarcık. The fort area may therefore provide good evidence for the transition from Byzantine to Turkish occupation during the 12th century, shedding further light on the scattered Seljuk and Ottoman finds that have already been recorded during the excavations.

In addition to excavation, a dynamic programme of conservation work is an essential part of the Amorium Project. Small finds are cleaned and conserved on a daily basis during the excavation seasons, thereby enabling the material to be studied, photographed and drawn in preparation for publication and, in some circumstances, even display in the Afyonkarahisar Museum. Plans for a new, state-of-the-art museum building are already well advanced; they include a section that will be devoted to Amorium, and the Amorium team will work closely with colleagues at the museum on the selection and arrangement of the excavated material in the new display. This, together with the well-received Amorium Guide Book that was published in 2007 in English and Turkish versions, will hopefully encourage more visitors to the site. Efforts will be made in coming seasons to improve signage and access to the main excavation areas in order to enhance the visitors' Amorium experience.

The longer-term goal is to open up parts of the site as permanent exhibition areas. To this end there is an ongoing intensive programme of stone conservation. Work at the Lower City Church has already stabilised much of the fabric of the building, parts of which were first exposed as long ago as 1990. In addition to repair and consolidation, some judicious reconstruction of marble door frames, columns and architectural furnishings has also been carried out, requiring the use of heavy stone-lifting equipment, such as the gantry donated in 2007 by Şuayp Demirel of Demmer and Demmak Industries, İscehisar. Although it involves expensive, time-consuming and potentially dangerous work, the periodic arrival of the mobile crane always brings a sense of added excitement and, at the end of a hard day's work, achievement.

In recent seasons there have been marked improvements in the infrastructure and facilities at Amorium. These included the installation near the Lower City Church and the organisation of a dedicated conservation laboratory, complete with two new microscopes. The purchase of the village house next to the Church, completed shortly after the end of the 2007 season, enabled us to clear away some of the property's outbuildings and organise a proper stone yard and depot for material excavated from the Church. Likewise, one of the new container units was used for the conservation, study and storage of the fresco fragments recovered mainly during the excavation of the southeast chapel and its entranceway in 2007 and 2008. Another of the units was given over for research and photographic work, and the two upper-storey units were made into accommodation for the growing number



Work at the Lower City Church, using the mobile crane in 2008 during the excavation of the south cemetery area

of team members. In 2009 a standpipe was even installed at the Dig House, providing us for the first time with running water, pumped from one of the old, probably Byzantine, wells in the village.

Another important aspect of the Amorium Excavation Project's mission is publication. The unique nature of the site and its finds has meant that there have been many demands for lectures, conference papers and scholarly articles. In October 2011, for example, three more presentations were given to audiences in Greece and Cyprus. Every effort has been made to involve different members of the excavation team in the process and, as a result, publications have appeared in a number of different languages. Likewise, the Project's own website continues to be maintained with pages appearing in both English and Turkish. Two volumes of *Final Reports* have been published; another two are set to appear before the end of 2011 and work has already begun on yet more volumes. One will be a full and detailed report on the excavation of the Lower City Church, which promises to be a major contribution to our understanding of Byzantine ecclesiastical archaeology.

Much work still needs to be done at Amorium, since it is a site with great potential, not only for the Byzantine period but for others as well. It comprises a large prehistoric man-made mound, a medieval Lower City and an extensive ancient necropolis. Occupation has been attested for the Early Bronze Age and the Phrygian, Hellenistic and Roman periods; these layers, however, have been barely scratched as yet. Nevertheless, Amorium undoubtedly reached its peak under the Byzantines, especially as it was the hometown of a short-lived dynasty of emperors in the ninth century – that of Michael II, his son Theophilus and his grandson Michael III. The finds associated with this period, fortuitously preserved as a result of the city's destruction in AD 838, underscore Amorium's importance as a site of great historical and archaeological value.