

News on the street and other research at Aphrodisias in 2018

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If you want to understand the energetic culture of the Greek East under the Roman Empire and its supercharged production of grand marble monuments, Aphrodisias is one of the best places to go. The site has been excavated continuously since 1961 and offers a brilliant picture of eastern city life from the first to the sixth century. The city was part of the Roman province of Asia but had a special autonomous status until c. AD 300 when it became the capital of the new province of Caria. Recent research at the site has shown also how a changing community continued to live among the imposing remains of the Roman city through the Byzantine and Ottoman periods.

Fieldwork in 2018

After the completion of major excavation in the South Agora and its pool in 2017, work in 2018 was focused on excavation in the Tetrasyon Street, on a new project in the Basilica and on the publication of the South Agora excavation. Our research team worked from 25 June to 20 August, our conservation team much longer, from 11 June to 31 September. There were 55 of us, both senior staff and students, from Turkey, the UK and the US, as well as 60 local workers employed in excavation and site conservation. Our government representative, kind and knowledgeable, was Fatih Mehmet Yıldırım from the Aydın Museum. We had important results and interesting finds.

The street. The Tetrasyon Street runs north-south from the Tetrasyon to the Theatre, and its excavation is designed to investigate a key urban artery, to bring new information about late antique, Byzantine, Seljuk and Ottoman Aphrodisias, and eventually to open the street for visitors. In 2018 an impressive new stretch of street to the south of the Sebasteion was uncovered. The columns, capitals and brick arches of its colonnade were found as they fell in a dramatic earthquake collapse across the full width of the paved avenue. Several columns carried painted late antique inscriptions, praising both the Christian God and the emperor, ‘lord of the inhabited world’.

The architecture had come down directly onto the street paving, which was therefore still in use at the time. The earthquake, which brought about the same collapse in the northern part of the street, is dated there by a coin hoard closed in AD 616/617. Unusual finds from this part of the street include a marble frog, a fragment of a beautifully worked alabaster face and a complete green-glazed classical Ottoman bowl.

The architectural details of the colonnade are of considerable interest. The columns carried a fascinating set of varied Ionic capitals, each one a thoughtful late antique

(fifth-century) reception and redesign of the classic Ionic capitals that still dominated the public cityscape. The capitals carried plain impost blocks for the springing of the brick arches. The Ionic capitals with separate imposts seem to document a short, experimental period in late antique architecture, before the two components became fused in standard sixth-century impost capital designs.

Excavation directly in front of the entrance to the Sebasteion explored successive levels of the street paving and uncovered a well-built sixth-century street drain whose walls made liberal use of Roman spolia – statue parts of various scales broken up for use as building stone. The most remarkable item was part of a colossal portrait statue, probably of an emperor. Its plinth was carved with a large support in the form of an Archaic Corinthian helmet with rams’ heads carved on the cheek pieces. The idea was to represent the emperor as armed like the heroes of old.



Tetrasyon Street, view from the south.



A statue support in the form of a Corinthian helmet that was built into a drain wall.

Further north on the street, a large baulk in front of the Niche Building was removed, which led to the discovery of further incontrovertible evidence that the structure to the west of the street wall was a bath building. The evidence consisted of a well-preserved hypocaust accessed by what seems to be a *praefurnium* punched through the street wall in late antiquity. This bath should be the evocatively named ‘First Bath for the Council of Elders’ which is mentioned in the inscribed text on the statue base in the central niche of the Niche Monument.

Conservation work on the street paving north of the Niche Monument produced a striking find from the street drain: a small, finely worked, grey-marble head of an African boy. The expressive head had separately inlaid eyes and was perhaps part of an elaborate table support.

Agora. The excavation of the South Agora pool was completed in 2017, and this season was devoted to conservation and to collaborative publication work. The bones, coins, pottery, small finds and carved marbles were studied and written up by a team of some 12 specialists. Surprises included the identification of a camel’s leg bone. The long series of mask-and-garland friezes from the South Agora colonnades, returned to Aphrodisias from Izmir in 2009, were displayed in a magnificent new ‘frieze wall’ constructed on the square outside the Aphrodisias Museum. It is designed to greet visitors as they enter the site.

Basilica. A major new project to conserve and present the façade of the Civil Basilica was begun in earnest. It faces directly onto the South Agora at its southwestern corner. Its large double half-columns and capitals were moved to our marble workshop (the Blue Depot) for repair. Extensive marble-tile floors immediately inside the building were re-exposed and conserved. And an impressive polychrome mosaic was found in the eastern aisle beneath the level of the 1970s excavation. It contained an unusual motif of a wide-staring eye in its border. The mosaic was carefully conserved.

Further research. Other individual research projects were also pursued this year, on the Bouleuterion, Sebasteion, Stadium and Temple of Aphrodite, as well as on the South Agora. There were other important finds to record and study, including a small inscribed altar dedicated ‘To Hadrian the Saviour’, the much-travelled emperor, and a new arcaded sarcophagus from the southeastern necropolis that combines figures of the nine Muses and five figures from the realm of Dionysos.

Publications

Publication remains a high priority, and new Aphrodisias monographs that came out in 2017–2018 include: N. de Chaisemartin and D. Theodorescu 2017: *Aphrodisias VIII: le Théâtre d’Aphrodisias*; E. Ögüç 2018: *Aphrodisias IX: The Columnar Sarcophagi*; J. van Voorhis 2018: *Aphrodisias X: The Sculptor’s Workshop*.

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Conservation of the marble-tile floor in the Basilica.