

Patricia Daunt takes a stroll round the site of a magnificent ancient city in western Turkey that Caesar Augustus called his own

# At home in *Aphrodisias*

**R**ecently widened roads have halved the time that it once took to drive the 230 kilometres south-east from Izmir or Kuşadası to Aphrodisias. Yet this extensive archaeological site, as beautiful, varied and arresting as any in the whole of the Mediterranean basin, is still relatively remote and not always included in tours of Classical Turkey.

Complete with all the attributes of a self-confident Graeco-Roman city – temple, theatre, baths, agora, odeon and stadium – Aphrodisias is smaller than Ephesus, less showy than Pergamum, less ancient than Sardis. Yet it yields to none for addictive charm, a charm that has much to do with its atmosphere: millennial sanctity coupled with the muted splendour of ancient architecture and the finest of marble statuary, in a site excavated with subtle expertise and still studded with

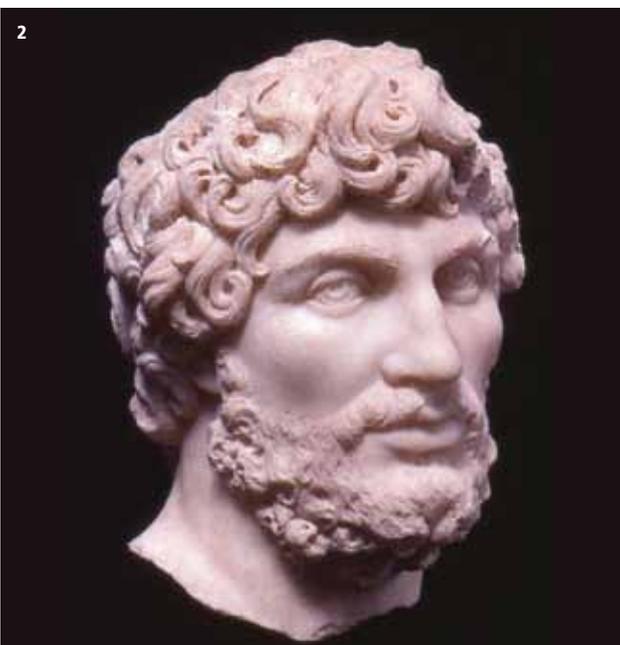
**1. An aerial view of Aphrodisias showing the theatre (top left), South Agora (bottom), basilica (centre) and baths (bottom right).**

vines, pomegranates and mature stands of tall, shimmering poplar.

Aphrodisias is steeped in the wondrous legends of western Asia Minor, telling of the goddesses Ashtoreth, Ishtar, Cybele and

Aphrodite. By the 4th century BC, the Carian settlement had already existed for over 5,000 years – a farming settlement in the fertile valley of a tributary of the Menderes river, dominated by an aristocracy of local landowners acting as guardians of a sanctuary to the ubiquitous, laughter-loving Babylonian deity of fertility and love. It was not until the 3rd or 2nd century BC that the Carian Ninoo was renamed Aphrodisias, or ‘city of Aphrodite’, and the old sanctuary was given some kind of temple, the vestiges of which were found beneath the building we see today.

The relative prosperity of the city which surrounded the temple was rudely interrupted during the dark days of the early 1st century BC – a terrible time in Asia Minor for those cities caught between Roman occupier and Pontic invader. Only when the sea battle of Actium in 31 BC finally saw the end of the Roman





Republic did Aphrodisias's loyalty to Rome bear fruit and provoke a surge of pilgrims to her temple.

A golden age of six centuries, from 30 BC to AD 550, under the stability of the Roman Empire, saw Aphrodisias enjoy a magnificent programme of urban expansion. It owed much, as did the school of sculpture for which the city was to become famous throughout the empire, to the extensive quarry of the highest quality marble, which lies barely three kilometres (two miles) from the city centre. It remains easily accessible in the foothills of Babadağı, where you can still see marks left by tools used there 1,500 years ago.

Sumptuous buildings – the late 1st century AD basilica so massive that it took up three full city blocks – all ornately decorated with depictions in marble of deities, emperors and local notables as well as domestic and wild animals, transformed

**2. Fine life-size marble Antonine portrait head found in 2005 in the Civic Basilica.**

**3. Marble relief showing Augustus and Nike from the north building of the Sebasteion. H.159cm, W. 159cm, D. 44cm.**

**4. Over-life-size faceless marble statue of Aphrodite herself found near the Temple of Aphrodite in 1961.**



the late Hellenistic city. Even visitors with no feel for the sanctity of the shrine and little knowledge of the significance of the marble, are spellbound by the quantities of handsome, well-preserved buildings and the array of astonishingly vibrant Graeco-Roman statuary that has survived.

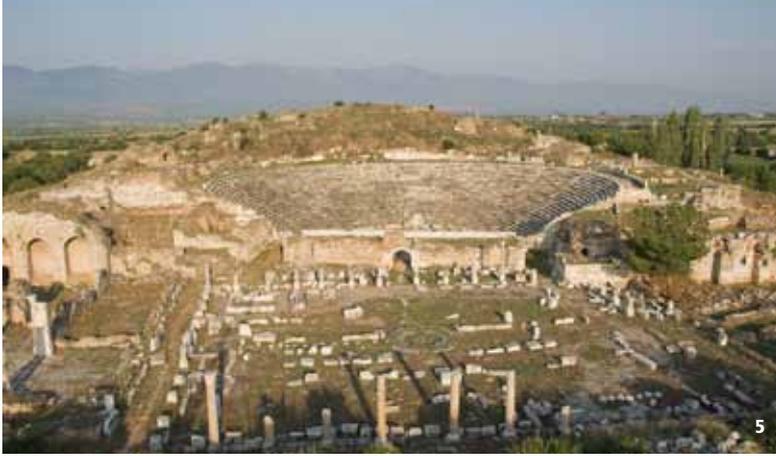
The work of unearthing, recording, conserving, restoring and displaying the finds was completed by the two directors of the New York University project who have led the excavations since 1961.

Certain 18th- and 19th-century dilettantes had ridden up the Menderes valley to rediscover the 'beautiful city built wholly of white marble'; French and Italian archaeologists had made a start in the 20th but it was the late Kenan Erim who spent nearly 30 years (until his death in 1990) excavating at break-neck speed to reveal the treasures of the site. In nearly a quarter of a century since 1991, Professor Bert Smith of Oxford University has consolidated the earlier work and taken it forward with all the expertise and empathy Aphrodisias deserves.

When Professor Erim, a Turkish archaeologist at NYU, arrived in 1961, ancient Aphrodisias had been renamed Geyre. He found a village settled by incoming Turcomans, their children, dogs, sheep and goats huddled among the ruins of the old city centre. The fertility of the soil and the abundance of water had attracted them to settle. Of Aphrodisias's former glory the new inhabitants knew nothing. Even



the theatre, with 32 or more rows of seats, was hardly discernible, as it was filled with spoil on which the houses were perched. In 1963, the villagers moved two kilometres to the west, where a new site had been prepared for them. The process was slow but, by 1985, with only a few fields still under cultivation, the archaeological site within the walls was expropriated thanks



5

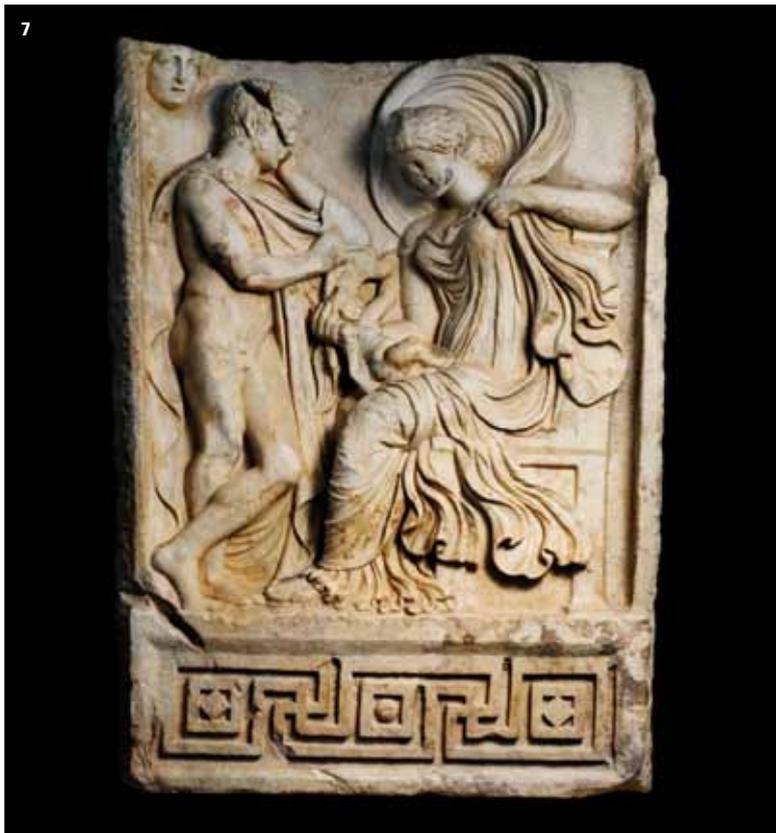


6

to a Turkish patron. Aphrodisias is unusual in owing much of its early splendour to a single benefactor. Inscriptions confirm that, echoing the city's political aspirations, the initial building spree was financed by one Gaius Julius Zoilos, an Aphrodisian who had been enslaved, possibly by Julius

Caesar himself. Inherited and freed by Octavian, it is thought that he made a triumphant return to his native city around 40 BC, as a diplomat and agent in Roman imperial service and now a city oligarch.

He was created High Priest of the Temple, marked out the sanctuary boundaries, endowed the cult,



7



**5. The 3rd-century AD stoa and, left, the theatre baths were uncovered during the 1970s.**

**6. Professor Bert Smith, the director of excavations at Aphrodisias, standing by the 2nd-century AD 'Blue Horse' found in front of the basilica. It is now in the Sevgi Gönül Museum housing the surviving Sebasteion reliefs.**

**7. Beautiful marble relief showing Anchises with Aphrodite holding a baby Eros in her lap, from the Sebasteion's south building.**

**8. The 1st-century AD Sebasteion, a temple complex dedicated to the three Caesars.**

paid for the building of a new marble temple, gave the theatre a new stage façade and the North Agora a grand marble portico. The munificence of Zoilos was commemorated by the series of sculpted panels that adorned his tomb. They are now displayed in the main passageway of the museum; the 'Zoilos frieze' was unearthed a mere stone's throw from where it is now displayed.

Visitors walking round the city clockwise will soon reach the 1st-century BC theatre, scooped out of the eastern slope of the Acropolis, and may notice that it was considerably modified when gladiatorial and wild-beast contests became fashionable. Excavation brought to light an elaborate three-storey stage building and a big cache of statues, all now in the museum. The jewel in this crown was a pair of boxers: complete, life-size statues of athletic victors of the 3rd century. They are mature and muscular in their nudity, bare-knuckled, with leather thongs wrapped around the full length of their arms.

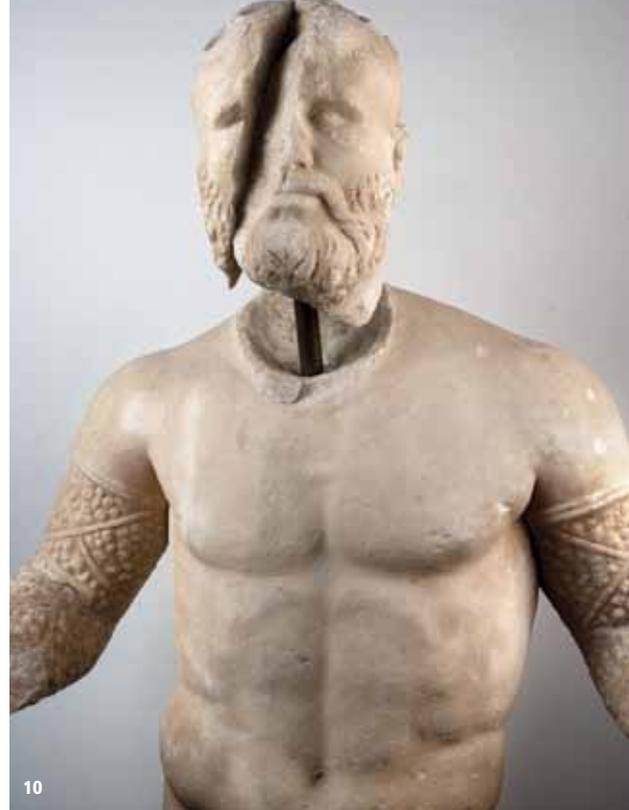
On the east wall of the theatre's



8



9



10



11

**9. An overview of the Hadrianic baths and South Agora.**

**10. One of a pair of life-size 3rd-century marble statues of boxers found in the theatre where they would have fought.**

**11. A section of the somewhat defaced inscriptions on the east wall of the theatre, the so-called 'Archival Wall', proclaiming that Emperor Augustus named the city of Aphrodisias as his own.**

stage building the Aphrodisians proudly inscribed an astonishing collection of documents bearing witness to their city's special relationship with Rome. These remarkable imperial letters record the grants of autonomy, immunity from taxation, and asylum rights for the shrine of Aphrodite. The inscription

begins with a majestic testimonial, incised in exquisite Greek lettering, from the Emperor Augustus, when he was Octavian the Triumvir, naming Aphrodisias the one city in all Asia he had selected as his own. The texts on this 'Archival Wall' are, however, somewhat defaced, as when the Aphrodisians converted to

Christianity during the 5th century AD, the pious denizens renamed their city Stavropolis and scratched out almost every mention of the pagan goddess Aphrodite.

The visitors' pathway leads to the grandest of the city's pair of bath-houses: the Hadrianic baths, among the finest in all Asia. They are certainly the best preserved. A building of a light freshwater limestone, once splendid with marble revetment on the walls, it is striking for its complicated underground service corridors, complete with furnaces and water channels. The decoration of the *palaestra* – forecourt – with large pilasters carved with figures of Eros, birds and animals intertwined in scrolls of acanthus leaves is unmistakably Aphrodisian.

The baths overlook and are connected with the South Agora, a long, colonnaded plaza and the focus of a new archaeological project. The huge basin (175 metres long and 25 metres wide) with semi-circular ends, was evidently created for citizens' leisure and is bordered by seating, statuary and planting.



12

It is the planting stimulated by an inscription mentioning a ‘place of palms’ that now attracts particular attention: the carbonised remains of seed suggest that further research may finally establish that the *Phoenix theophrasti*, or Cretan date-palm, provided shade along the borders of the pool.

The goddess’s temple, within sight of the agora, was in due course converted into a fine church, with a massively engineered reordering of its structure to provide apse, sanctuary, nave, aisles and narthex. Seated on one of the fallen marble pillars, the outlines of temple as well as church still evident, no visitor seems entirely immune to the atmosphere of this once-holy place.

Visitors pressed for time may miss out the ravishing *bouleuterion* (Council House) – which is particularly enchanting when frogs are serenading one another in the flooded auditorium in the springtime – but under no circumstances must the stadium be ducked. It lies alongside the northern line of the city walls and is the finest and most complete example of its kind to survive from antiquity. With two curved ends and sides (bowed out forming an ellipse) to ensure an unobstructed view of the entire field, it is 270 metres long, its 30 tiers of seating capable of accommodating 30,000 people. A notable adaptation at

**12, The stadium seen from the air. It is 270 metres long and can seat 30,000 spectators.**

**13. Marble relief of Claudius subduing Britannia, from the 4th-century elevation of the Sebasteion’s south building. H. 165cm, W. 135cm, D. 43cm.**

the east end was evidently made to accommodate gladiatorial and wild-animal contests following the city’s decline. Much modern scholarship has gone into examination of the graffiti, cuttings for awnings, masons’ marks and inscriptions for reserved seats, which include women’s names.

The Aphrodisians were evidently keen on ostentatious gateways. The monumental *tetrapylon*,

for example, which stands at the entrance to the temple precinct. The Austrian architects who handled the multiple intricacies of its reconstruction for Professor Erim have recently turned their attention to the Sebasteion, a grand temple complex dedicated to Aphrodite and to the Julio-Claudian emperors, which was only discovered in 1979 beneath a line of Geyre cottages. Enough of the Sebasteion has been rebuilt, incorporating casts of sculpted panels of gods and emperors, to give visitors an understanding of the temple precinct’s ancient splendour. Now work has started on its *propylon* – the gate giving on to the street. Then the Agora Gate may follow.

Aphrodisias’s long, slow, mediæval death began with the end of the empire’s system of provincial administration during the 6th century. Administrative collapse was hastened by a shrinking economy compounded by plagues in the 540s and earthquakes during the 580s. As Metropolitan See of the Byzantine Empire’s Diocese in Caria, the residual functions of Stavropolis, as Aphrodisias had been renamed, lingered on until the arrival of the Selçuk Turks in the 12th century.

In the museum’s gardens and exhibition halls, the heady spoils of over half a century of excavations are displayed. Collections of



13



14

ornately carved sarcophagi line the pathways and ring the museum, introducing us to generations of Aphrodisian families seen through the eyes of artists so gifted and original that their style of sculpture has been termed mannerist, even baroque. Inside, the collection of the finest statues and reliefs of the city's craftsmen, as well as intriguing examples of trial pieces from the sculpture workshop, have recently been reordered. A new gallery has been added to display the sculptures from the Sebasteion in their original sequence. This remarkable series of figured marble reliefs depicting scenes from Greek mythology and Roman imperial history, of which more than 70 survive, are unique in content and preservation.

The rebirth of Aphrodisias since the 1960s has been the achievement of Professors Erim and Smith, with their large teams of archaeologists, architects, epigraphists, scholars and conservators of many backgrounds and a dozen nationalities. But a key, if discreet, contribution is also made by the teams of local villagers who, having worked for decades with the architects and conservators, are now highly skilled artisans – the new generation of Aphrodisians, conserving the art and architecture of their forebears.

The demands of tourism and of scholarship are no more easily

**14. The magnificent tetrapylon, a monumental gateway leading to the temple complex which was rebuilt in 1990.**

**15. Section of the 1st-century BC life-size marble panels that adorned the tomb of Zoilos, the city's benefactor, found near the museum.**

**All photographs courtesy of Professor Bert Smith.**



15

reconciled now than in the 1960s. The complexity and expense of meeting these demands are ever-increasing. That Bert Smith, tied for most of the year to his chair of Classical Archaeology and Art at Oxford, has so far succeeded, as Kenan Erim did before him, is a tribute to him and to his backers on both sides of the Atlantic. It helps that each season produces eye-catching results – artistic as well as scholarly. The remarkably well-preserved late-Antonine portrait head of a member of the local elite found in 2005 on the floor of a grand chamber at the south end of the Civil Basilica makes the point. ■

• The Aphrodisias Project is a registered charity (No 293148). Supported by the Friends of Aphrodisias Trust, 20 Ripplevale Grove, London N1 1HU, it holds fund-raising events, including lectures by Professor Bert Smith, during the first three months of the year.



• *Aphrodisias VI: The Marble Reliefs from the Julio-Claudian Sebasteion* by RRR Smith is published by Philipp von Zabern at €89.90