

Turkish Delight for Valentines Day

Turkey might be famous as the home of Troy and Ephesus, but from where we were staying near Antalya in the south earlier this year these were out of reach. Probably less well known but I suspect equally and possibly more spectacularly the Mediterranean coast is the home of a series of Roman theatres and other 'ruins'.

Our first visit was to Perge. The theatre here is off limits on safety grounds but the remains of the Roman town are extensive and quite impressive, a notable 'dual carriageway' paved high street with watercourses and drains, the shops remain tantalising unexcavated. There is a hugely impressive bath complex with enormous buildings and some interesting stonework. About the most impressive Roman town remains I have seen. However what really grabbed my imagination were the remains of the stadium, the largest in Asia Minor, situated between the town and the theatre.



Arches, Perge Stadium

Most Roman (and Greek) stadia are set into a hillside or natural dip in the ground, removing the need for much in the way of a structure to support the stands. As with all these ancient stadia the one at Perge is U shaped, unlike most others it has been built up and the U comprises a series of arches, each tapers down towards the inside of the stadia to allow for the slope of the seating, they also taper in narrowing towards the rear. Every third arch acts as an entranceway into the stadium itself, the other two would have been shops etc., the Roman equivalent of souvenir stalls and hot dog stands.



Perge was followed by the 2nd Century Theatre at Aspendos, one of Turkey's less well kept secrets and reputedly one of the best preserved of all Roman Theatres. Much maintained and one suspects restored the theatre this is essentially complete and until recent years a regular venue for productions. It is worthy of a photo montage in its own right at some future date and as it is relatively well known I shall say little about it here, except that it holds 20000, the seating steeply shelving down so that at least one vertiginous

Aspendos Theatre facade

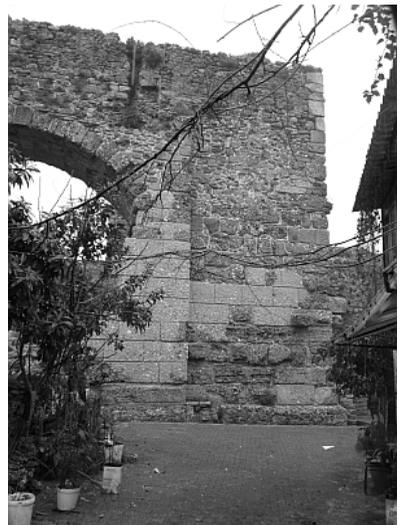
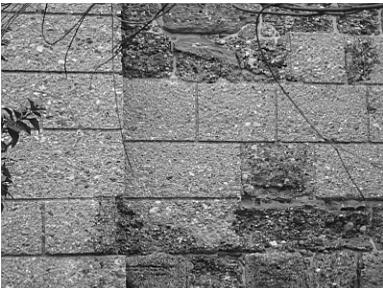
contributor to this mag had to ingloriously shuffle down the steps on his posterior. The façade, which forms the backdrop to the stage – thought to be one of the first to be built this way allowing for stage scenery to be used is mightily impressive, the back/seating merges into the hillside as earlier noted was the usual case to support seating.



Above: Aspendos interior; Below centre: Aspendos façade corner; Below right: Side Bath House stonework; Bottom left: Side Bath House restoration detail

Interestingly as is the case with a number of the buildings in this region the theatres main structure is built out of what appears to be dressed conglomerate blocks as can be seen left. I'm not sure I've ever seen it dressed so square before, although most of the windows and arches in the theatre utilised more 'user friendly' sandstone.

Our next port of call was Side, where conglomerate was again the stone of choice. There is a substantial, but inaccessible



bath building here, which has undergone some recent renovation. It would appear that the repairs here utilised concrete with the joints cut into a cast slab/block rather than the whole being reconstructed out of mortared replacement blocks. A surprisingly good match in terms of texture, if perhaps a little incongruous.

Side was a strange place, scattered ruins interspersed with an unkempt town, in one place a tree, probably no more than 50 years old was growing around an ornately carved pillar top which had obviously been left alongside it as a sapling. Once away from the houses pillars and stone are strewn everywhere – you cannot imagine them remaining un-reclaimed so to speak in many places, but this is perhaps more the norm in Turkey.

Side too has a spectacular 20000 seat theatre. Unlike most theatres it is essentially free standing supported by massive arched vaults. The resultant internal corridor running around below one level of seats and above the level of others (it is at least partly sunken) is particularly impressive. Theatres differ from colosseums in that they are D shaped rather than essentially circular or elliptical. However



Side Theatre. Left: Exterior arches; Right: Internal gallery

few towns seem to have had a colosseum and often the theatre doubled for gladiatorial events. At Side the stage area is sunk below the level of the seats from which it is separated by a ditch backed by a 2m high wall. On top of which the seats start. This would presumably have protected the audience from marauding lions or maybe stopped the gladiators from taking excessive evasive action.

Next stop Myra, (Demre). The theatre here was rebuilt after a massive earthquake in the second century AD. Here the seating is built up against a more or less vertical rock face rather than into it.



Myra Theatre. Left: Interior seating and cliff; Right: dressed and tooled archway

As a result it contains some impressive arches and galleries running around it under the seating, with steps to access the higher levels of the auditorium. Once again the seating is estimated at 20000 capacity. One starts to doubt the figures as they are the same for all three theatres. Myra felt smaller, perhaps because the seating is not as steep as Aspendos, I also reckon both Aspendos and Side have around 14 more rows of seats.



The tooling on much of the stonework remains impressive today and there are some impressive carved blocks remaining which would have originally decorated the stage area.

Left: Myra Theatre carved theatrical masks.
 Below right: Myra rock carved tombs
 Below Left: Lycian tombs near Simena

Myra is also well known for its Lycian rock tombs, many of which are carved into the relatively soft rock of the cliff-face immediately alongside the theatre. These predate the theatre by perhaps as much as 600 years dating back to the time of Alexander and follow a tradition of burying the dead in house or room shaped tombs. It is thought that the Lycians located their tombs on cliffs or near the coast to aid the transportation of the dead souls by winged sirens. You find these rock carved tombs throughout the region, along with numerous other forms of tomb,



most notably stone sarcophagi type tombs, still scattered through the countryside, here I'd imagine most would have ended up as flower beds in someone's garden by now.

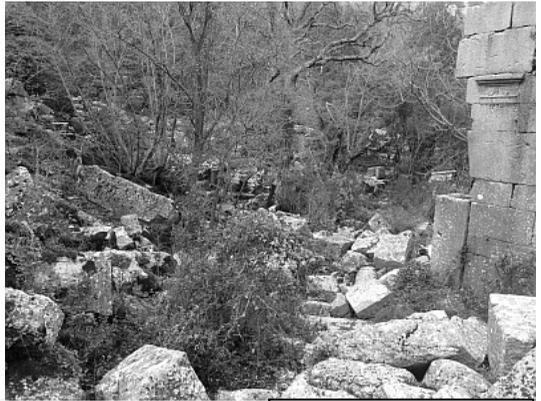
One final stop Termessos a Pisidian city established sometime before the time of Alexander, later becoming an independent city state in the Roman Empire, and situated over 1000 metres up in the Taurus mountains. It is a little remote at the end of a windy track and a stiff uphill slog. Eventually it becomes something of an Indiana Jones experience, a lost city in a jungle, you feel you might be the first visitors since the locals recently vacated it, rather than actually leaving around 1500 years ago.

Termessos Gymnasium emerges from the 'jungle'



You get the impression, especially along the almost impassable colonnaded street, that all the stone is still there. Elsewhere fallen pillars are embedded in the paths, fragments of brick and tile are everywhere.

It is a 'raw' site', it feels untouched, and probably much the same today as it has been for centuries. Whilst the vegetation and the sites unmanaged nature make it difficult to imagine much of what was there, the sheer quantity of stone and extent of some of the remaining buildings seem somehow to give more of a sense of what was there than any other site I have visited. It was a strange experience.



Termessos
Above: Colonnaded street.
Left: Theatre



The defensive walls are impressive (Alexander failed to conquer Termessos, and the Romans didn't even try) and there is the obligatory theatre, which held only 4200. Mind you 4200 people in the middle of nowhere in the mountains gives food for thought. Somewhat more tumbled than the others it is magnificently situated. At last a theatre tucked into

the hillside like it is supposed to be, beyond the backstage wall the land drops away cliff like. I felt the builders here missed a trick in building a back wall to the stage rather than leaving it open in the Hellenic tradition, letting the natural scenery form the backdrop. Mind you the scenery is so vast that the back wall is dwarfed anyway, and somehow we felt more dwarfed by this theatre than the others. Termessos is very much an enigma.

Just beyond the theatre is an Odeon (smaller theatre) rectangular with imposing 10m high walls almost complete around its perimeter (shown next page). The stonework and quality of dressed stone is magnificent. The Odeon walls are double skinned, not particularly thick they appear to be built of alternating layers of traced stones and throughs.

The remains of the nearby Temple of Zeus are formed from equally impressive stone, although only a single stone thick and traced their size; weight and snugness of fit keep it standing. Mind you I do suspect this could well be extensively restored, some nearby retaining walls show exposed ends of pillar sections amongst the stonework, usually a bit of a giveaway (and a feature of many



Right: Termessos Odeon stonework exposed at a gap in wall



Byzantine walls/buildings in Turkey, so there has been some reclamation in the past!). Somehow one stone has become displaced, we had a go at replacing it... This was the point at which Brenda said "Well I suppose it's one way of spending Valentines day". Who said I'm obsessed! Goodbye!

Left: Termessos Odeon wall
Below: Temple of Zeus, Termessos

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Bibliography

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