

Jottings From Aegean Turkey

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A few days ago, as I walked along the shore of Istanbul below the Byzantine sea wall, a powerful image struck me. Atatürk stared down on me through a fissure in the fortifications. His gilded head evoked for me his triumph in the modernization of Turkey, his creation of a secular state and his declaration that his country would never again seek to expand its borders. I began to muse on the place of this nation in the world today, and felt optimistic about current diplomatic efforts by the Turkish government to mediate between factions in the Middle East.

Returning from a few weeks exploring and photographing archaeological sites on the Aegean coast of Turkey, my thoughts focused on the vital role of the ancient Greek cities I had visited. Just as Europeans and Americans barely acknowledge the significance of contemporary Turkey, few appreciate the contribution of cities on the west coast of Anatolia to the intellectual, artistic and mercantile power of the Hellenic world. We tend to think of Athens as the fountainhead of Greek philosophy, science and art; but in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, before the Athenians reached their Golden Age, Miletus produced the first Greek scientists and philosophers and developed the universally accepted Greek alphabet. She also generated the most extensive trade in the Mediterranean, supplying fine cloth to the luxury loving city of Sybaris in Sicily, establishing a lucrative mercantile presence

in Egypt and Mesopotamia and founding at least forty-five colonies mostly on the Black Sea. Miletus is also cited in countless books on urban history as the original example of urban design based on the Hippodamian grid of streets, named after the Milesian architect and planner Hippodamus. The more I read about Miletus and the closely linked sanctuary at of Apollo Didyma, with its renowned oracle, the more fascinated I become. However a serious problem confronts the architectural historian. Not one stone stands from the archaic city that must have been so fine. It was completely destroyed in 494 BCE by the Persians in revenge for its leading role in the Ionian revolt against their imperial power. Indeed little more remains from the classical era when Miletus was rebuilt; most of the architecture we see is Hellenistic and Roman. Earthquakes and stone quarrying have taken their toll; archaeologists have carried away major architectural remains to Berlin; furthermore the silting up of the four harbours by the changing course of the River Maeander has cut the city off from the sea that gave it life. Meanwhile flooding in winter and spring of the Delphinion, (the site of the Altar of Apollo,) and the nearby Sacred Way makes it hard to visualize the once-vibrant civic centre.



Fragments of the Roman Harbour monument (left) and a few remaining columns of the Hellenistic Stoa that once defined the southern side of the harbour (right)

Despite the loss of most of the structures that stood here, I found myself trying to imagine the form of the city. Archaeologists from the German Archaeological Institute, beginning their excavations in the 1880s have established the entire city plan. So, spreading a large version of it out wherever I stop, looking at the few standing structures and the fragments lying on the ground, I attempt to visualize the urban scene. I make use of reconstruction drawings by artists, based on the evidence of the stones. It inspires me to know that the sinuous curve on a large marble block was one of the twin tails of a triton, cavorting above head level on the Roman Harbour Monument; that the few lower shafts of Doric columns rising out of the water nearby belonged to a Hellenistic Stoa stretching 160 metres to define the southern edge of the harbour; that under the algae-covered water a little to the north lies the paved court of the Delphinium, where Milesian sacrificed to Apollo for a thousand years.



The murky water we see in this photograph covers a former fulcrum in the Graeco-Roman city: behind us, the Lion Harbour, now far from the sea, was one of the busiest in the Aegean. Out of the picture to the right, the Harbour Stoa, with many shops opening off it, gave order and beauty to the scene of maritime and commercial activity. To the left, two simple doorways, often penetrated by festive processions, opened into the hallowed space of the Delphinium. Straight ahead, the sacred way, a place of civic ceremony, led past the Gymnasium on the left, and the North Agora on the right, towards the South Agora, the largest formal market place in the classical world. At its entry, the Romans added a grandiose gate with two

tiers of columns. (Having collapsed in an earthquake, this ornament of the city has been reerected in Berlin) Beside the Market Gate stood the exuberant Roman Nymphaeum, alive with river gods, goddesses and nymphs, and gushing with water from amphorae held aloft on nubile shoulders or from the mouths of fishes. (only the aqueduct behind it survives today) Box-like at the centre of this picture stand the solid walls of a Turkish bath built centuries later; but beyond it, four Ionic columns rise to support an entablature. Although they are all that remain of the graceful civic architecture of Miletus, they possess the key to the recreation, in our minds, of Milesian architecture.



The precisely fluted shafts of such columns, whether Doric or Ionic stood out in the sunlight against the shade behind them. Surrounding the agoras and lining the Sacred Way, the stoas that they fronted gave protection from sun and rain to all who thronged the heart of the city, whether for commerce, politics, religious observance, or just to parade in the latest finery.