

# THE LATE ANTIQUE COASTAL SETTLEMENT OF APERLAE ON THE LYCIAN COAST

Robert L. Hohlfelder

## ABSTRACT

Aperlae was a small maritime community almost isolated from the interior by the rugged coastline of ancient Lycia and largely dependent on the sea for its existence. It was very typical of countless habitations along the littoral of the Mediterranean that passed almost unnoticed in our surviving literary texts. From such documents, we know only that Aperlae was a settlement on the Lycian coast that in the Late Antique era had a bishop. Beyond confirming its existence and a moment of Christian importance, these few random references enlighten us no further.

R.L. Vann (University of Maryland) and R.L. Hohlfelder (University of Colorado), joined by W. Leadbetter (Edith Cowan University) in 2000-1, carried out a terrestrial and underwater survey of Aperlae in the summers of 1996-2001. Although these investigations were strictly limited by license restrictions, they revealed numerous glimpses of the ebb and flow of the millennial life of this site. The surviving physical features were closely observed, as were the chance finds of natural and material cultural oddments that dotted the urban landscape and the submerged harbor floor. *Comparanda* from other coastal sites were examined with a view to better understanding Aperlae's physical record. Our hypotheses and musings were then tested against our understanding of the macro geo-political forces that determined the sweep of history in the eastern Mediterranean to provide the broader stage for our settlement's local play. From such a rudimentary methodology and limited evidence, a skeletal relative chronology and a historical outline for this small city were forged. More specifically for purposes of this conference, our observations and data seem to suggest that Aperlae's florescence appears to have been in the Late Antique era, while its abandonment in the face of increasing uncertainties was nearly contemporaneous with the sinking of the Yassiada ship.

Having endured the depredations of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Aperlae seems to have entered a new period of prosperity during the reign of Diocletian. Cabotage and traffic in purple dye produced on site and used for dyeing cloth were the mainstays of the economic life of this settlement. In the Christian era, the existence of at least four large basilica churches in a small city with a population estimated to be 1,000, along with at least two extramural churches, provides proxy evidence for considerable local wealth stemming primarily from the business of purple, possibly augmented by pilgrim traffic to and from the Holy Land.

Changes of fortunes in the sixth century caused a retrenchment and fortification of the urban core possibly after the ravages of the plague in 541-2 AD. The fate of this city for the next hundred years can only be surmised, but assuredly its halcyon days had ended. Aperlae seems to have been abandoned after 655 AD, when the Byzantine navy lost control of the Lycian coast following its defeat at the Battle of Phoenix. Sometime after this watershed event, its inhabitants appear to have fled to safety inland or to points west and never returned. No significant habitation of the site has occurred since then.