Towards Aphrodite

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Towards Aphrodite

Abstract
I wasn't sure I could walk that far to be honest - 17 km seemed quite a long way for a day's walk. It had been in my mind for years to make the walk from new Paphos to old Paphos along the pilgrim's way mentioned by the geographer Strabo in the first century. He wrote that every year 'men and women came from other cities to celebrate all along the road' from the port at new Paphos to the sanctuary of Aphrodite on the hill high above the coast. I tried to research the route by looking for the old ways through Yeroskippou, tracing the path through shrines as Stathis had suggested.

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TOWARDS APHRODITE

I wasn’t sure I could walk that far to be honest — 17 km seemed quite a long way for a day’s walk. It had been in my mind for years to make the walk from the port at new Paphos to old Paphos along the pilgrim’s way mentioned by the geographer Strabo in the first century. He wrote that every year ‘men and women came from other cities to celebrate all along the road’ from the port at new Paphos to the sanctuary of Aphrodite on the hill high above the coast. I tried to research the route by looking for the old ways through Yeroskipou, tracing the path through tombs as Stathis had suggested.

Finally, it was decided, on Easter Saturday we would go — a small group gathered in the grey light just before dawn at 6.15 a.m. The morning stars still hung above the tangled spreading trees around the Apollo hotel, sparrows beginning to softly cheep, a dove. I felt energized but nervous, not sure my feet and legs, still aching from the hard stones of the excavation, would manage.

Five of us gathered — Anthea, Cypriot English and bi-lingual; Di tiny and determined, braving with eagerness; the potter Julie, just arrived from Geneva with open eyed warmth; and Pam, an archaeologist from Derbyshire who had surveyed northern England for sites, and had lost both her husband and mother in the same year.

It was beautiful walking in the first glimmer of light. The ruined theatre still caught the shadows of night as we turned into the ancient road, Ekaros St. We looked at the dim arc of seats, the pale stones of Fabrika Hill and the old gap of the North East gate at the point where Strabo had said, ‘thousands gathered to walk to the Temple of Aphrodite at Palaiaphos’.

Kyria Aghina was sweeping the street, amazed that we would walk 17 kilometres to Palaiaphos. Where would that road have been? We walked down Ekaros St, tombs beneath all the modern concrete houses, to an area called Elleniki, where another cluster of Greco-Roman tombs had been found. We passed the tiny chapel of Phaneromeni, where a sturdy woman in faded layers of blue was sweeping and picking up rubbish. We went in, lit a candle, laid a fresh red geranium for the icon of the Panayia, descendent of Aphrodite, crowded with smaller saints. ‘There’s a bit of an ancient column near that small church’, Stathis had said, indicating distant origins.

On the outskirts of the new town of Paphos were villas built by developers, named after deities, in remorseless repetition, set in dead end streets without shops or gathering places. Beside this bright but desolate suburb was a scrubby field where an old grey villa loomed among rocks, its concrete scabby and
time emerged as each step became necessary, important. Each person met on
significance, as the day lengthened.

We joined the traffic road through small villages. Anarita appeared as a
taverna beside the road, and Anthea asked an older man walking outside ‘is there
another road? Can we avoid the main road?’ He considered her question carefully
but before answering asked her about her family. She said her grandmother had
been a weaver at Anarita. His face lit up and he claimed her as a relative; soon
they were exchanging genealogies. But there is no longer any knowledge of the
old route to the sanctuary — it may be closer to the sea; this he said was the sure
path, any other direction was uncertain, just a shepherd’s trick wandering along
the limestone hills.

The grey metallic road stretched ahead. Watching my feet I stepped over a
number of things thrown from cars, pressed plastic water bottles and metal drink
cans flattened by wheels, with sometimes a snakeskin, a dead beechhog. The
journey to the sanctuary of Aphrodite ‘who holds in her hands the fate of all things’
is fall of incident and a wealth of detail, but in any era, the path is unpredictable.

The University of Wollongong Senior Artists Research Forum at the Sanctuary of Aphrodite
(Paleokastro) Cyprus. From left: Deborah Pellow, Lawrence Waihe (crouching), Tim Maddock,
Jacky Hedger, Nikki Heywood (crouching with pomegranate), Jacqueline Orme, Derek Kroeker.
(Phot Diana Wood Conroy)