



MYRA



The sunken metropolis of St Nicolas

Myra, on the southern coast of Turkey, was home to the 4th century bishop St Nicolas (of Santa Claus fame). What remains of his city? In 2009, **Prof. Çevik** launched major investigations to discover more. The first season has revealed the most unexpected results.



LEFT The theatre at Myra - the largest and grandest in all Lycia.

ABOVE A depiction of the 4th century bishop, St Nicolas.



ABOVE The Santa Claus version of St Nicolas.

We are in Myra, Central Lycia, on the southern coast of Turkey. This is a spectacularly beautiful and fecund area – abundant with fauna and flora and steeped in history. This was also once the home of St Nicolas.

To some, St Nicolas may appear to be a figment of fanciful imagination, and indeed he is a man who has been mixed with magic and invention. Part of his mythical status comes from his popularisation in America by the Dutch Protestants of New Amsterdam who converted the saint into a Nordic magician (Santa Claus = Sint Klaes = Saint Nicolas). From this he has developed into the jolly bearded man on a supernatural sleigh who dutifully delivers dolls and fizzy drinks each Christmas.

Nonetheless, it is well recorded that the original St Nicolas of Lycia was a bishop during the

reign of Emperor Constantinus (AD 324-337); that is, around the time when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The original St Nicolas was lauded as the patron of children, sailors, merchants and scientists, and was famed for his miracles – such as protecting and pleasing children and the poor, saving sailors, finding lost belongings, and foreseeing the future. So, even before the Dutch Protestants developed his mythology, the stories surrounding St Nicolas were embellished and invented – particularly those about how he secretly granted aid to those in need. Indeed, just facing Myra’s harbour is a prophetic/cultic centre that includes a temple to Apollo, God of Light, and it is as though the earlier patron deity did not die but merely got a new name: for Apollo, too, was the patron of children, sailors, merchants and scientists. However, in his zeal to rid the area of such paganism, St Nicolas and his cohorts apparently ordered the destruction of a number of other temples at Myra including the “most beautiful temple of Artemis Eleuthera”.

It was from Myra that the Saint developed his doctrine and spread his beliefs, before finally dying and being buried here in AD 342 at around the age of 70. Myra has since been regarded as a holy centre and an attraction for pilgrims. ➔



RIGHT Within the Church of St Nicolas, near Myra.



ABOVE The rock-cut tombs of the Sea Necropolis at Myra.

His probable resting place was to be a lonely church, known as the Church of St Nicolas on the outskirts of Demre, an agricultural town in the locale. The church contains many unique frescoes depicting the life of the saint. Though the building has several constructional layers, the earliest only date from the 5th century AD; nonetheless, it was widely understood that the good saint was laid to rest here. However, in 1087, a group of Italian merchants, claiming to have been sent by the Pope himself, broke open

the tomb that was believed to contain the saint and discovered a Roman Era sarcophagus set within it, from which they stole the bones that had been preserved in fragrant myrrh. These relics are now in Bari, Italy, in a church built especially for them; however, Turkey has asked the Vatican for help in ensuring the stolen relics are finally returned to their original grave, and thus allow the saint to resume his rest, in peace, in his own homeland.

As for St Nicolas's church, it was bought by the Russian Tsarina, Anna Galicia, who began large scale repairs in the 1880s, including domes that are strikingly different from the original structure. This is still a wonderful and calming church to visit. But what was St Nicolas' home city like? What else remains at Myra?

A wondrous site

In fact there is much more to Myra than St Nicolas' church. Each year, some 600,000 people visit Myra to pay homage not just to Santa, but to Myra's wonderful archaeology, notably its vast theatre and numerous rock-cut tombs. The Theatre of Myra is the most magnificent in the whole of Lycia and contains the highest quality decorations. Its stage building includes rich reliefs of the Goddess Eleuthera, Ganyমেদে, The Eagle of Zeus, and Medusa. The outer facade of the stage building is also decorated with reliefs – the only known such example in all Lycia. It is a true Roman Era theatre: the vaulted substructure supporting the auditorium was organised for the spectators' entry and exit. The many inscriptions found at the theatre yield information about various aspects of the

BELOW Line drawing of the Lion Tomb (Texier 1836).





city – such as an inscription at the orchestra, which explains that the city pays 7,000 *denarii* in tax to the Lycian League from the revenue of its import-export businesses (the highest tax in Lycia), while another marks the place of a salesman serving snacks to the audience.

Myra also boasts numerous exquisite rock cut tombs, most dating to the 4th century BC. Some 23 inscriptions have been found on these tombs, 13 in Lycian and ten in Ancient Greek. One is especially touching and reads: “Moschos, loves Philiste, the daughter of Demetrios”.

Seven tombs are particularly highly decorated, and of these, two contain the most impressive rock cut reliefs yet found in Lycia. The first of these has a magnificent temple façade. In its centre is a portrait of the grave owner’s family and all around are reliefs of lions and bulls – plus a goddess sprouting from vegetation. She is identical to the goddess Artemis/Myrrh, who was associated with prairies, nature and vegetation, and also appears on Myrian coins – she is also now the official logo of our excavations!

The second notable rock-cut tomb was carved in the style of a wooden civilian house. Its façade has 11 life size figures: the father and his family adorn the walls of the entrance, while visitors and friends are shown on the outside



TOP One of Myra’s painted tombs - WHICH ONE? A FEW MORE WORDS ABOUT WHAT WE SEE HERE, thanks.

ABOVE Close up showing the grave owner’s family.

rock faces. In the Classical Age, the white rock surface of the tombs would have been painted red, yellow, blue and purple, and been a most impressive sight. Rock tombs with their imitation wooden architecture façades are traditional to the Lycian Classical Age. And aside from four temple type tombs, all the others are ‘house-type’ tombs.

Rock tombs were the preserve of the middle and upper classes in the Classical Age. The fact that Myra has so many suggests a good number of rich people lived here. I suspect that the elite of this large Classical Age population lived within the safety of the acropolis, while the



ABOVE The rock-cut tombs of Myra's so-called River Necropolis.

rest lived at the foot of the hill, and especially at the southern slope where the still-thriving town of Demre was first founded.

In addition to the theatre and the tombs, though lesser known to the general public, is a Roman bathhouse, cramped between a sea of greenhouses at the side of the road. Dating to the 2nd or 3rd century AD, it is in a fairly good state of preservation. Most of its rooms are easily identifiable as they follow the classical plan of Lycian baths: the main bathing units (*frigidarium-tepidarium-caldarium*) are lined side by side as three rectangular rooms; to the east along these extends the *apoditerium*. The masonry is mainly brick-mortar. Apart from this, inscriptions note the presence of two

other bathhouses in the city. It would appear that Myra constitutes an important example of Lycian urbanism that peaked during the time of the *Pax Romana*.

Myra's drinking water was supplied by a canal mostly carved in the living rock along the valley. These canals met the demand for water by the bathhouse and the rest of the city. There is a *nymphaion* at the crossroads between Myra and Andriake, the city's harbour. Indeed, our 2009 excavations have shown that the *nymphaion* could also have functioned as a thermal facility.

The city's harbour

Myra's harbour district of Andriake lies southwest of the city. Its development was closely linked with that of the metropolis and it would have been an important link in the chain of Mediterranean seaports, opening up Lycia to the world. It was both on the Antiocheia-Roma route, and an important harbour on the Istanbul-Cyprus-Egypt route. Archaeologists working in recent years have found two important wrecks very close to the harbour: the *Gelidonya* (1200 BC) and the *Uluburun* (1316 BC), demonstrating that international maritime activities had existed on these coasts since the 2nd millennium.



RIGHT Air photo of Myra's harbour district of Andriake, after excavation in 2009. To the left is XXXXX [WHAT ARE THE TWO ARCHAEOLOGICAL STRUCTURES?]. To the centre is the now-swampy marsh area.

Despite these early wrecks, Andriake was a magnificent natural safe haven, and clearly played a major part in maritime traffic and commerce. It also must have been vital for accessing neighbouring cities that could otherwise only be reached through tough mountain terrain.

As for the harbour's foundation, Antiochus III is known to have come to Andriake with his fleet in 197 BC and, since it is unlikely the harbour would have been built just for his arrival, it must predate this event. At the other end of the date spectrum, its absence from Piri Reis' *Kitab-ı Bahriye (The Naval Book)* indicates that the harbour had fallen out of use by the 15th century AD.

The ancient harbour is now mostly marshland. However, several buildings in the south town are in good condition including a warehouse, harbour wall, a *granarium* (grain store), the market-place, parts of the harbour road, residences, water tanks, and a number of churches and chapels. A wall surrounded the whole district and an aqueduct supplied water from the karst spring. Evidence, including lengthy monumental inscriptions, from the harbour demonstrates that it was an international commercial centre – arguably the largest international trading port on the Mediterranean coast – and that Andriake was the most important harbour in the region.

The fact that Myra was not only served by such a major harbour but also contained the grandest and largest theatre in the region suggests that Myra was the most important and influential city in Lycia during the Roman Period – long before its famous saint. A host of further evidence confirms this.

The metropolis of Myra


Historical records tell that Myra held a significant place in the democratic system administered by the Federal Constitution of the Lycian League. In his *Geography* (XIV, III, 3), Strabo describes it as “one of the six largest cities with three votes”. Its political privilege resulted from its strong economy and from it being a large metropolis.

Inscriptions on the rock-cut tombs also describe Myra as the “Metropolis of Lycia”. Indeed, such was the greatness of the city that



ABOVE Excavators work inside a cistern at Andriake.
RIGHT A depiction of Andriake's vast Granarium (by L. Meyer, 1800).



it was home to a family of deities and contained temples to Apollon Surios as the chief God of Lycia, and to the goddess Eleuthera. Additional records tell how the Lycian aristocracy contributed to the political and economic power of the city. For example, Opramoas, the greatest capitalist of Lycia, donated 100,000 *denarii* for the renovation of the buildings that were damaged in the earthquake of AD 142, for the construction of the theatre, and for the Temple of Eleuthera; 56,000 *denarii* for the *peristylum* and other works of the *gymnasion*; 12,000 for oil and 10,000 for repairs to the gold covered Statue of Tykhopolis. Meanwhile, Lykiarkh Licinnius Longus of Oinoanda donated 40,000 *denarii*, and Kyanean donated 10,000 *denarii* with 

MYRA'S SCENTED SEMANTICS

The origin of Myra's name is unclear, however the name 'Muri' exists in Lycian B, the script that was in use around mid 1st millennium BC. We think that 'Muri' became transliterated into 'Myra' during the time of Alexander the Great with his assertion of the Greek language to the area. Both 'Muri' and 'Myra' are possibly identical in meaning to 'myrrha' – or Myrtle tree. This tree (which continues to be grown locally) can be used to produce an aromatic oil. The latter was used extensively as a sacred pilgrim souvenir, particularly during the Christian era.

his daughter Lycia for the construction of a *stoa* in Myra, and together with his father-in-law Polykharmos, he donated 10,000 *denarii* for the theatre of Myra.

So where is the Temple of Artemis Eleuthera, Statue of Tykhopolis, *Stoa* of Lycia?

Other ancient sources note the existence of Cathedral of St Eirene, Episcopal Residence, Dioskoroi Square, Leo District, Church of St Kallinike, Church of Kreskens and the Churches of Dioskorides in the 6th century AD. But where are they all?

When visiting Myra, the fact that it was once a magnificent metropolis in the Roman and Byzantine Periods can only be hinted at by the few remaining structures.

Subterranean secrets

It seems plausible that these other buildings lie locked underground and that Myra should be regarded as something of an ‘Anatolian Pompeii’ – entombed not in molten ash, but beneath the fertile soil. For, as one descends down from the mountain range to the theatre and tombs at Myra, one is met first by a sea of glass and plastic: the well-stocked greenhouses that bestow prosperity on the inhabitants of Demre. This agriculture is enriched by a thousand year-old alluvial fill that reaches to a depth of some 8m. And all the evidence, from

historical and epigraphic information and the spread of ruins on the surface, to information gleaned from the inhabitants of Demre (many of whom have dug wells and foundations into the alluvium) as well as our geophysical survey suggests that most of Myra still lies beneath this alluvium.

Thus far, all our research indicates that Myra spreads beneath almost the entire area of modern Demre – that is, at least 2km in diameter. Considering its size, the city must have several major structures such as an *agora*, assembly hall, temples, dwellings and further necropoleis. My belief is that a huge Byzantine metropolis could be unearthed – though what remains of the Roman metropolis under the Byzantine layer, or of the earlier ages, will only be apparent after excavation of the Byzantine level. So, in 2009 we began a comprehensive research programme at Myra.

Byzantine surprises

To our great surprise, our first season’s work has revealed not a Byzantine sanctuary to St Nicolas, but a c.5th century AD synagogue, at the very time when Myra was the Lycian centre of Christianity!

This is exciting indeed, for it is the first ever evidence for the existence of Jews in Lycia. It has been obtained complete with architectural,

iconographic and written proofs. We think this coastal synagogue would have been intended for the use of the small Jewish community at the harbour and also for the Jews coming into the harbour to trade. Given that Myra was the most important international trading centre of Lycia, we think this is no coincidence, considering the Jewish people’s involvement in commerce. The synagogue demonstrates the presence of a Jewish community within the religious/social structure in Myra.

The synagogue faces the harbour, in front of the western corner of the 2nd century *Horrea Hadriani*, or the Silos of Emperor Hadrian (massive structures used to store supplies before they were transported by

BELOW Excavations underway at Andriake: revealing the first known synagogue in this part of the Mediterranean.






LEFT One of the Menorah plaques found within the synagogue.

sea to Rome). The main room is some 7.25m x 5.08m with a 3.9m diameter apse. It has two doors, and would have been accessed from the north and the west, with a second room to the west. In the main room, we found two columns, two column bases, two parapet pillars, architrave parts with architectural decorations and parts of three parapet plaques, two of which were decorated and one plain. We reassembled various pieces of stone that seemed to come from an *aedicula* (or small shrine) that would once have been in front of the apse. The two columns were marble, and topped by a frieze of a line of oil lamps. The plaques, too, were marble, though they were found broken after having fallen to the floor of the building. They bear familiar symbols of the Jewish religion. Only one plaque, measuring 87cm x 44cm, is complete, and is engraved with high quality

workmanship. At its centre is the seven armed Jewish candelabrum (*menorah*), to the right there is a *shofar* (the ram's horn), and to the left is a *lulav* (the closed frond of the date palm tree). Across the top is a three line inscription that names those who have dedicated it: Macedonius, Prokles, Romanus and a woman named Roma.

We found three other inscriptions, two of which contain the phrase "*erini epi ton Israel*" (or "Peace (be) with Israelites") and end with religious phrases such as "Amen" and "Shalom". The three inscriptions are generally similar to known Ancient Jewish dedicational inscriptions. It is the structure and the architectural decorations that suggests the 5th century AD date.

As our excavations at St Nicolas' sunken metropolis have only just begun, we wonder what other unexpected finds remain waiting to be discovered at this wonderful site. The inconceivable richness of the archaeology that is already visible on the surface – such as the largest and most beautiful theatre in all Lycia – made us greatly excited to think of what else might be lying beneath the alluvium. We fully expect more great surprises in the coming years.

Science, culture and tourism owe a debt of gratitude to the Ministry of Culture, whose generosity has enable this project to achieve as much as it did in this, its first, year; we also want to thank Akdeniz University, the Municipality of Demre, the District Governorship of Demre, and especially the local people and our hardworking excavation team. Their reward, and ours, will be the eventual unearthing of this extraordinary metropolis from beneath our feet. And maybe, one day, the bones of Saint Nicolas will be returned, so completing this magnificent site with his saintly manifestation. 

SOURCE

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BELOW A view of some of the charming frescos within the St Nikolas Church. The archaeologists hope that the good saint's bones be returned one day.

