

Sykeon rediscovered?

A site at Kiliseler near Beypazarı

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Abstract

The *Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon* gives a detailed picture of village life in later Roman Galatia, on the eve of the Persian and Arab invasions. Though known to be located near the intersection of a Roman highway and a river, the site of Sykeon remained unidentified in modern times. Earlier inability to locate it was attributable to mistakes made by 19th century historical geographers of Anatolia, but even after their errors were corrected by David French, the site could not be found. In September 1995 the writer and Peter Brown of Princeton University discovered a terraced slope, strewn with late Roman pottery, at Kiliseler near the village of Tahirler, south of Beypazarı. The site, and its geology, conform to the known characteristics of Sykeon, including its distance from neighbouring towns, and provide suitable settings for many of the events in the career of Saint Theodore, thus raising the hope that archaeology may now be able to supplement information available from the saint's *Life*.

Özet

Sykeon'lu Aziz Theodor'un Hayatı istilalarının başlamasından çok kısa bir süre önceki Roma Galatyası'nın geç evrelerine ait köy yaşamı hakkında ayrıntılı bilgi vermektedir. Sykeon sit alanının bir Roma anayolunun bir nehirle kesiştiği noktada bulunduğu bilinse de modern dönemlerde bu yerin nerede olduğu bulunamamıştır. Bu yerin önceki girişimlerde nerede olduğunun belirlenememesi 19. yüzyıl Anadolu tarihi coğrafyacılarının yaptığı hatalardan kaynaklanmaktadır. Bu hatalar David French tarafından düzeltildikten sonra bile sit alanının yeri saptanamamıştır. Eylül 1995'te makalenin yazarı ve Princeton Üniversitesi'nden Peter Brown, Beypazarı'nın güneyinde Tahirler Köyü yanındaki Kiliseler mevkiinde bulunan ve Geç Roma dönemine ait seramik parçalarının bulunduğu teraslanmış bir yamaç keşfetmişlerdir. Sit alanı ve bu alanın jeolojik durumu Sykeon'nun komşu kasabalara olan uzaklığı da dahil olmak üzere bilinen özelliklerine ve Aziz Theodor'un yaşamı boyunca meydana gelen olayların geçtiği yerlere uymaktadır. Böylece arkeolojinin yardımıyla Aziz'in hayatı ile ilgili yeni bilgilerin ortaya çıkarılması umudu doğmuştur.

The *Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon* (Dawes, Baynes 1948; Festugière 1970) has long been regarded as one of the best sources for knowledge of village life and popular religion in western Anatolia in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. Nevertheless, as long as the location of Sykeon was unknown, it was impossible to match detailed information from the text with archaeological evidence. In the last few years however, a site with a strong claim to be Sykeon has finally emerged in response to a question asked in a village teahouse.

Almost all discussion of Sykeon has derived from the *Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon*. It was written by the saint's successor, hegoumenos (abbot) George, who was still an 18 year old novice at Sykeon when Theodore died there on 22 April, Low Sunday, 613 (Festugière 1970: 19, 152). The village was 12 Roman miles from Anastasiopolis-Lagania and 15 from Iuliopolis. It lay on the arterial high road of the Empire, the public highway of the imperial post, along which both routine communications and emperors and generals travelled, not just in Theodore's time but also for centuries before (French

1981: 13; Mitchell 1993: 123). The settlement was on, or close to, the Hieron Potamon or river Siberis, a tributary of the Sangarios, marking the frontier between Bithynia and Galatia (Belke, Restle 1984: 228–9).

In addition to its central place in the *Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon*, Sykeon is also known from the *Buildings* of Procopius (5.4.5–6) while the *Tabula Peutinger* mentions a mutatio or horse station at the crossing of the Hieron Potamon (Miller 1916).

Abbot George's *Life* of the saint was begun at Sykeon during Theodore's lifetime when the future abbot was still a boy at the monastery. George, who eventually became the third abbot of Sykeon and the last known head of the monastery, was the son of local villagers who had pledged their child to the monastery in gratitude for a miracle performed by the saint. However, it was completed at a later date, almost certainly in the relative safety of Constantinople soon after the death of Heraclius in 643 (Kaegi 1992: 212), several decades after Theodore's remains had been translated to a monastery in the capital.

George's narrative identifies many small towns and surrounding villages visited by Saint Theodore (Mitchell 1993: 127) plus buildings and locations within and around Sykeon, including the monastery churches built by Theodore as part of his monastic foundation. Details of the latter have been carefully listed and analysed by Kaplan (1993).

The decision to transfer Theodore's body to the capital during the reign of Heraclius points to the later fate of the site and perhaps to the reasons why it seems to disappear from later history. The translation of the saint's remains looks like an official response to the threat on the capital (Kaplan 1993: 75–6), first by the Persians and later by the Arab armies, in the first half of the seventh century, but it may also have been prompted by a decision to evacuate the monastery in the face of the invaders. Following these disasters, both the village and the monastic settlement at Sykeon may well have been abandoned like many other late Roman settlements in Anatolia (Foss 1975). We have no record of them after this date and no place names or local traditions suggest any continuity on the site beyond the late Roman period. The only external surviving piece of evidence from a later period is a cross, now in the Dumbarton Oaks Collections, which has been tentatively linked with the monastery at Sykeon by Mango (1988: 48).

With the secure coordinates supplied by the intersection of a road and river, it might have been expected that the site would be easy for 19th and 20th century scholars to find on the ground. In the event, mainly because of a wrong turning taken by the 19th century historical geographers of Roman Anatolia, Sykeon proved elusive.

John Anderson, fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, travelling in Galatia in 1898, believed that he had found the site (Anderson 1899: 53), but his identification was based on the incorrect identification of the ancient Siberis/Hieron Potamon as the modern Aladağ Çayı. Anderson also made a mistaken assumption that the Roman road followed the line of the 17th century Ottoman chaussée, or post road, and the modern Beyşehir-Ankara road. This led to a further confusion and hence travellers of the 1890s, such as Anderson and Crowfoot, and those of later decades, looked for Sykeon in the wrong place. Anderson (1899: 65) in fact located his candidate for the village of Sykeon at an ancient site by a Roman bridge that he found on the Aladağ. That site is now presumed to be Iuliopolis, the town which lay 15 miles to the east of Sykeon. It now lies submerged beneath the waters of the Çayırhan reservoir (French 1981: 17).

In 1972 Anderson's entire Roman topography for the area was overturned when French discovered stretches of Roman road missed by previous investigators and was able to show that the line of the Roman road from Iuliopolis to Ankara was unrelated to the Ottoman and modern road which sticks to the valley. Instead, the Roman road went up over the hills towards Anastasiopolis (French 1981: 33, 42–4). In the early 1970s, long stretches of the Roman road, known to villagers as the İpek Yolu (Silk Road) or Bağdat Yolu (Baghdad Road), were still extant. Though the line of the road through the Tahirler valley was no longer visible, it is still remembered with considerable exactitude by local people in Tahirler.

French's discoveries further implied that the river known in antiquity as the Siberis or Hieron Potamon should be identified with the modern Kirmir Çayı rather than the Aladağ (French 1981: 44–5).

In the light of this fresh knowledge, the search for Sykeon was renewed. French (1981: 44) suggested that the village might be not actually upon the river, but a few kilometres from it. However, an informal search for Sykeon by French and Mitchell near Tahirler in 1990 produced only a Bronze Age site near Tahirler with no late Roman pottery (Mitchell 1993: 125).

The details of the *Life* however indicated a number of details, apart from those characteristics already mentioned, to look out for at any site potentially eligible to be Sykeon. The most important of these are as follows.

The *Life* implies (at some points) that the bridge over the Siberis was visible from the monastery of Theodore on the hill at Sykeon, for example, in the story of the healing at a distance of the Imperial Secretary, Phocas (Festugière 1970: 97–8).

otherwise hard to locate anywhere in the vicinity. We visited these new found caves the following day, and established that they were crudely excavated from highly stratified rock. It was not possible to draw any precise conclusions about their date or origins.

However our first day's journey ended with us sitting outside the teahouse of Tahirler and talking to the latter-day curiales of the area. I explained to the local people that a famous holy man called Theodore had once lived in the vicinity and we wondered where he might have been based. Could they offer any suggestions? To my surprise, this elicited the immediate reply that he must have lived at a nearby place called Kiliseler (=Churches).

Kiliseler was the name the villagers gave to a previously unknown site on either side of the road 3km to the north of Tahirler on the slopes of the hill on the west side of the road running north from the village. The hillside rises from a north-south valley of orchard fields, full of apple and mulberry trees, with the modern road running along its east side. This valley contained the bed of a dried up stream, once a tributary of the Kirmir Çayı which issued out of a very steep and high narrow gorge of hard igneous rock to the south. Kiliseler however stands very close to the point where the valley widens into a broad canyon of soft pale rock. The southern side of the terraces is in fact the geological contact point between the dolomite rocks of which the surrounding hills of the wider valley are made and the much earlier volcanic rock of the gorge.

As the slope climbs upwards, there is a series of levelled platforms and a stroll across them revealed that the terraces were strewn with late Roman pottery. The site showed several signs of disturbance. Since the 1980s, the water of the stream has been pumped in a pipeline up the hill to supply water to the neighbouring township of Kirbaşı. The trench for the pipeline runs straight through the site, cutting a trench through a late Roman building whose walls were clad with high quality marble revetment. On the bottom of the north side of the terrace slope was a very large fragment of marble, semi-circular and concave, but of uncertain purpose (fig. 2).

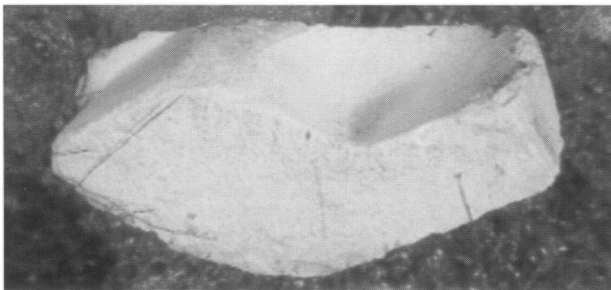


Fig. 2. Large fragment of marble of unknown purpose below terraces on west side



Fig. 3. Kiliseler. Late Roman village structure to the east of the road

The full site, however, is much larger than just the terrace area on the west side, and stretches more than a kilometre across. In the fields and slopes above the road on the east side are the remains of a village, strewn with coarse slip ware pottery from a much wider range of dates in the Roman period. Villagers said that until fairly recent times a large building of white stone stood there, which they supposed to have been a han, or inn. There were also two structures of which one was clearly a late Roman basilical church with an apse.

The evening the discovery of Kiliseler was made, I suggested that the site clearly deserved a formal survey, provided that we could obtain permission to undertake this. The survey duly began on 15 June 1996. Warmest possible thanks are due to all who helped us in 1996, including the then Minister of Culture, His Excellency Mr Ağâh Oktay Güner, for his assistance to our application; as well as to the then Director-General of Monuments and Museums, Dr Mehmet Akif Işık; the Director of Excavation, Dr Emel Yağcı Erten; the Kaymakam of Beypazarı, Musa Üçer; and to our government representative in 1996, Gökhan Bozkurt, for their constant helpfulness at all stages of our work.

The findings of the 1996 survey, and subsequent investigations now under way under the direction of Joel Walker of the University of Washington, are a matter for report elsewhere (Walker 2002). All that has been found since the original discovery appears to strengthen the probability that Kiliseler was indeed Sykeon, not least since there seems to be no other candidate for a late Roman site in the lower sections of the Tahirler valley, and certainly none which can present a topography which fits the various events of Saint Theodore's life as neatly. The area around Kiliseler offers locations which fit accurately with events from the saint's childhood brush with death on steep cliffs near the village (Festugière 1970: 9–10) to his descent in old age from the monastery terrace to the roadside interview with the fearsome general Bonosus (Festugière 1970: 111–12).

One mystery which does remain to be solved is exactly why the site was called Kiliseler, or 'the Churches', by local people in Tahirler at the end of the 20th century. No church can have been visible there in recent times. It is just possible that the name is a recent one, prompted by the appearance of a church-like structure to the east of the road in the 1980s — but it is a good 600m from the terraces. As used by the villagers of Tahirler, the name Kiliseler seems to refer primarily to the terraced area west of the road and the villagers say it was used by previous generations.

The question might be easier to answer if any previous travellers had noticed this site. However, there is no mention of it in the works of European travellers from the 16th to the 19th centuries, even though Beypazarı, only a few kilometres away, was for nearly two centuries the residence of western merchants in the mohair trade who recorded ruins and antiquities when they encountered them (Eyice 1971).

It is equally striking that to date there is no pottery or other evidence of any activity at Sykeon's village or monastery whatsoever after the seventh century invasions, even though the village lay on what was a major strategic route throughout Roman times. These are puzzles which future research will perhaps help explain.

Meanwhile, it seems reasonable to accept that the veil of historical obscurity which descended on Sykeon on Sunday 22 April 613, with the last recorded historical event there, the death of Saint Theodore, lifted again on another Sunday in September 1995, with the arrival of two inquisitive travellers at a nearby teahouse seeking knowledge from the local people.

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Fig. 4. View of Sykeon. Pumping station with Kiliseler terraces below

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