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Towards Aphrodite

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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 Yeroskipou, tracing the path through shrines as Stathis had suggested.

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TOWARDS APHRODITE

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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 star still hung over the tangled spreading trees around the Apollo hotel, sparrows beginning to softly cheep, a dove. I felt energised 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, bristling 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, Ikaros 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 Palaepaphos'.

Kyria Athina was sweeping the street, amazed that we would walk 17 kilometres to Palaepaphos. Where would that road have been? We walked down Ikaros 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, descendant 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



The University of Wollongong Senior Artists Research Forum at the Sanctuary of Aphrodite (Palaepaphos) Cyprus. From left: Deborah Pollard, Lawrence Wallen (crouching), Tim Maddock, Jacky Redgate, Nikki Heywood (crouching with pomegranate), Jacqueline Gothe, Derek Kreckler. (Photo: Diana Wood Conroy)

deteriorating. From this building came a terrible howling — it was inhabited entirely by dogs, with many animals confined in every room. In the early light it sounded foreboding, even anguished. The dogs' home and the new suburb obscured an ancient hypogeum, a cave shrine to Apollo Hylates, the Apollo of a vanished forest.

Once you steadily walk, space is covered, the road stretches behind and you move forward.

Now the developments thinned and golden grain stretched to the sea, heavy carobs and pines marking a dry watercourse. Trying to find the old route, we first went by the main road, lined with orange and walnut orchards, thickets of bamboo and cypress. The women exclaimed and chattered as we walked. Golden giant fennel towered above us, with stems light and strong, once used as a thyrsus, a kind of wand, by maenads in the wild. Poppies and asphodels flowered among field marigolds and blue flax. We went too far — the limestone ridge of Yeroskipou was visible from the flat fertile plain but the path was hidden. Turning back, we struck out between cypresses across a potato field and found beneath our feet an old and solid surface, much used, though not recently.

I had read in a study of the ancient routes of Cyprus that a fit man was expected to walk 35 kilometres a day, a woman or child 30. A different sense of

time emerged as each step became necessary, important. Each person met took 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 track wandering along the limestone hills.

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

(‘Towards Aphrodite’ was originally titled ‘Predictable Paths’ written by Diana Wood Conroy and adapted for performance on night 454 [17th September 2006] by Barbara Campbell for *1001 Nights* cast, a durational performance by Barbara Campbell [<http://1001.net.au>]).