

Revealing Rome's hidden frontier in eastern Turkey

Timothy Bruce Mitford charts a journey of exploration that has lasted 55 years



Dr Timothy Bruce Mitford FSA is an Associate Member of the Corpus Christi College Centre for the Study of Greek and Roman Antiquity at the University of Oxford, and Commander in the Royal Navy.

For a naval officer, the British Academy Medal is a rare and glittering honour. For me it is much more – it is an Ithaca moment, the ultimate affirmation that my rather longer odyssey has been worthwhile. The search for Vespasian's frontier in eastern Turkey started in 1963, in Ankara, with a Fellowship at the British Institute of Archaeology. And with the publication of *East of Asia Minor: Rome's Hidden Frontier* it is at last complete.

In September, 55 years ago, my valiant co-explorer and I arrived in a small town in the heart of the Antitaurus gorge. I was equipped with the great Franz Cumont's epigraphic notebooks from his journey in 1900 in eastern Pontus and Armenia Minor, a general letter of introduction from Michael Gough, Director of the Ankara Institute, and potassium permanganate and razor blades issued by Mary Gough to deal with snake bites.

That month we floated down the Euphrates on a goatskin raft beneath enormous cliffs, grappled with scorpions and fleas, watched warily for snakes and bears, and discovered the 2nd-century fort of Sabus, and at Zimara a building inscription of Trajan's governor of Armenia.

Only later did I begin to grasp the enormity of the task: to trace mainly on foot an unknown frontier stretching from Syria to the Black Sea, seven times the length and (where Xenophon looked down on the sea) seven times the altitude of Had-

rian's Wall, crossing four great ranges in a remote region scoured by centuries of destruction, and hidden by recent horrors, Kurdish sensitivities, and a difficult language; and to navigate between the whirlpool of Turkish bureaucracy and security, and the rock of British archaeological self-interest. There have been adventures and frustrations, and the task has at times seemed endless.

In 1966 I followed the Roman road for three days over the Antitaurus, and in 1972 with a mule walked for a week through the Taurus gorge.

But the largest challenge has been Armenia Minor, lying mainly in the *vilayet* of Erzincan: prickly with memories of the Armenian massacres, friction between Sunni Turks and Alevi Kurds, and brutal interactions between jandarma [Turkish Army Commandos] and PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] groups infiltrating across the Euphrates.

In 1984 I was denounced, and with my redoubtable sergeant arrested at gunpoint as an Armenian spy. In 1987 I was able to trace the main frontier road leading east for two days over the high Çimen mountains to the legionary fortress of Satala. There I stayed again with the headmaster, who knew every surviving inscription; and walked south along the alternative frontier road and over the high Sipikör pass to Erzincan.

Guarded in 2000 by a Special (Com-



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The Kara Mağara köprü ('black cave bridge') across the Arabkir Çay, Photographed in October 1963.

mando) Team, I was following an unknown section of the Roman frontier road high above the Euphrates when figures appeared like Apaches on surrounding hilltops: not watchful shepherds, as my sergeant thought, but a score of village guards, issued with Kalashnikovs by the Turkish State, and about to open fire. Happily unaware, we later discovered a kilometre-long traverse carved out of solid marble.

In my 1987 report to the British Academy, I wrote,

My research was conducted under almost continuous, and usually armed, escort. To keep up momentum demanded a constant mental and physical effort. Your grant was indispensable. But I was able to take it up only through a fleeting conjunction of Naval leave, decisive support from the British Embassy, and the confidence of the Turkish authorities, at short notice and in a region of potential difficulty. I was sustained throughout by the sheer decency of the Turkish police and military, and by the kindness of countless villagers.

In truth, you are never out of somebody's sight in Turkey. A villager or a distant shepherd is invariably watching. Treasure hunters, an excellent source of local guidance and memory, are always keen to help, for they know my Turkish Army maps will show them where to dig for Armenian gold.

Permits were a particular challenge. During the 1980s the British Ambassador applied on my behalf; but in the 1990s the route was through the Turkish Embassy in London. Successive ambassadors were highly supportive, and I was pleased with my applications. They were headed 'Corpus Christi College Classics Centre for the Study of Greek and Roman Antiquity' and were in Turkish. But in six years out of eight they were rejected in Ankara. An Under Secretary in the Finance Ministry later explained: any official could see at a glance that I was working for a Christian agency interested in Pontic Greeks, and that, as a Turkish speaker, I must be a spy.

I had finished my DPhil thesis in 1973. In successive years I found, as a rough guide, that a month in Turkey would take about a year to write up. This task started in earnest on a prototype navy computer in 1985. But it was only when I worked in the Oxford libraries after 2006 that the real challenge began to dawn. It took

about 7 years.

That all has now been completed owes a great debt to the encouragement and support of many Titans of the British Academy. Sir Ronald Syme taught me about epigraphy. Sir Ian Richmond taught me about Roman archaeology and laid down the challenge of the Euphrates frontier. In the Cilician mountains my father, Terence Bruce-Mitford, showed me how to behave in strange places. He knew more than he confided about eastern Turkey. For it he had organised SOE [Special Operations Executive] work, and was to lead a resistance force of Kurdish and Armenian murderers, should the Germans, expected in May 1943, move south from the Caucasus. In 1983 Sheppard Frere and Oliver Gurney spirited me away from the Cyclops in Ankara. Norman Hammond sent me an important legionary inscription he had found in Trabzon in 1965, and has held my hand for the last 20 years. My Teiresias, my examiner in 1973 and champion in England has been Sir Fergus Millar. My champion in Turkey has been Stephen Mitchell, Chairman of the British Institute at Ankara. Andrew Burnett has showered gold dust over my coin finds, and John Wilkes has guided *East of Asia Minor* towards its proper completion.

The British Academy itself has funded my research journeys with great generosity since 1974. And I have had four faithful companions: my wife, Patricia, intrepid and all-enduring; my college, Corpus Christi in Oxford, not least its President, Sir Kenneth Dover; since 1965 the Royal Navy, keen to nurture interpreters, and from 1981, when I served in the HQ of the Turkish Navy, conferring access and status in Turkey under military rule; and Oxford University Press, which has waited for these volumes for 40 years, and has produced them with patience and consummate skill.

Further reading

At the British Academy's Prizes and Medals Ceremony in September 2018, Royal Navy commander and archaeologist Timothy Bruce Mitford received the British Academy Medal in recognition of his book *East of Asia Minor: Rome's Hidden Frontier* (Oxford University Press, December 2017), the culmination of over 40 years of fieldwork tracing the last unexplored section of Rome's imperial frontiers. British Academy Medals are awarded for landmark academic achievements in any of the humanities and social science disciplines supported by the Academy. Dr Bruce Mitford's work had been supported by a succession of British Academy research grants between 1974 and 2002.

