

# Survey and landscape: the surprising Roman temple at Arıkuyusu (Mersin Province, Türkiye)

Naoíse Mac Sweeney

**Abstract** The existence of a Roman temple at Arıkuyusu is surprising. The temple stands in a remote location, nestling in an inaccessible upland valley in the high mountainous region of Rough Cilicia (modern Mersin Province, Türkiye). The presence of such an impressive monumental building in this seemingly unlikely location raises questions about the nature of settlement, cult, and landscape in the Roman period. In this short paper, I will offer a preliminary treatment of the temple itself, documented by archaeologists as part of the Lower Göksu Archaeological Salvage Survey (LGASSP), before considering it in its immediate landscape setting, and reflecting on the broader context within the region of Rough Cilicia.

**Keywords** survey, temple, landscape, Anatolia

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In a remote agricultural basin in Mersin Province, Turkey, the well-preserved remains of an ancient building stand proudly in the fields. The building is a Roman temple of a relatively common type, showing little trace of architectural elaboration or any especially noteworthy decorative or sculptural features. Yet the temple of Arıkuyusu is particularly significant for one thing – its location.

The importance of location and landscape has been the subject of some discussion between myself and Günther, often sitting in his office with the sun streaming in through the tall windows. It has been gratifying during these last few years to have a colleague with whom I could share my interest in archaeological survey, and to whom I could look to for advice on methodologies and comparisons. I had first met Günther some years previously when we examined a doctoral thesis together in Denmark, when there was no way to know that we would eventually become colleagues years later at the University of Vienna. I was struck then, as I still am now, by his thoughtful insights into archaeological landscapes, as well as by his integrity. This contribution stands in honour of those pleasant times when we were able to dispense with mundane discussion of academic administration and university bureaucracy, and were instead able to enjoy speaking about research.

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**Fig. 1** Map of Türkiye, showing LGASSP study region and the location of Arıkuyusu (© map: Naoise Mac Sweeney)

The research of which this contribution is a part is the Lower Göksu Archaeological Salvage Survey Project (LGASSP)<sup>1</sup>. The LGASSP project was instituted in 2013, in response to plans unveiled by the Turkish government to build a new hydroelectric dam at Kayraktepe in the Mersin Province of southern Türkiye (fig. 1). If built, the dam would bring much needed development and an economic stimulus to the region, but would also lead to the flooding of a large portion of the Göksu River valley. The valley is rich in cultural heritage more broadly, but particularly in archaeology. It is perhaps best known from the spectacular remains of the Byzantine monastery at Alahan<sup>2</sup>, but other significant sites and monuments include the neo-Hittite rock relief at Keben<sup>3</sup> and the important multi-period *höyük* settlement of Kilisetepe<sup>4</sup>. The aim of the LGASSP project was to document archaeological heritage within the flood zone, preserving some record of these important sites and monuments before they were themselves lost, submerged beneath the waters of the flood lake. The project was led by Dr Tevfik Emre Şerifoğlu, at the time based at Bitlis Eren University but more recently affiliated with Mimar Sinan University (both Türkiye), with Dr Anna Collar of Southampton University (UK) and myself, at the time based at the University of Leicester (UK). Crucial contributions were also made to the project by Dr Stuart Eve as our aerial imaging and GIS expert (at the time of Bournemouth University and now of Wessex Archaeology, both

1 For LGASSP see Şerifoğlu et al. 2018; Şerifoğlu et al. 2017, Şerifoğlu et al. 2016; Şerifoğlu et al. 2015; Şerifoğlu et al. 2014.

2 Gough 1985.

3 Işık 2005.

4 Postgate – Thomas 2007.

UK), Nazlı Evrim Şerifoğlu as our illustrator and photographer, Dr Carlo Colantoni as a survey team leader, as well as Nevra Arslan, Şivan Ayus, Panagiotis Georgopoulos, Bengi Başak Selvi, and Söngül Yetişir, all graduate students from either Türkiye or the UK. I am grateful to the whole team, but especially to Anna and Emre, for their contributions to this short paper.

My colleagues and I had long been aware of the Roman temple at Arıkuyusu, after more than a decade of work in this region, but it was not until 2017 that the LGASSP project made an official visit to the site in order to document the remains. The work was carried out under the kind auspices of the General Directorate for Cultural Assets and Museums of Türkiye. We are grateful to Halil Görgülü from the Konya Regional Board for the Protection of Cultural Assets for serving as the representative of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2017 when the work was undertaken. At the time, we were able to document not only the temple structure itself, but also something of the archaeological remains in the surrounding landscape.

## The temple

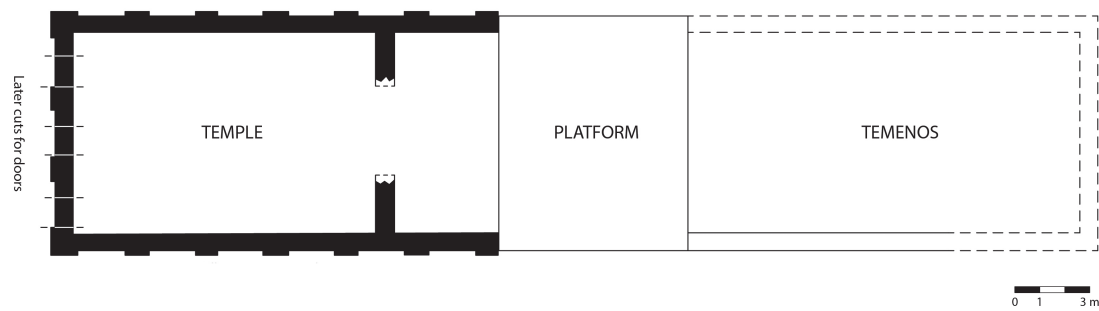
The existence of a Roman temple at Arıkuyusu has previously been mentioned in print by archaeologists<sup>5</sup>, and the site is of course well known to the inhabitants of the region. Until now, however, it has not yet been fully described in publication, nor does it appear in many synthetic works discussing Roman architecture and/or cult in Cilicia<sup>6</sup>. What follows is a preliminary overview of the remains of the temple and its surrounding landscape as documented within the frame of the LGASSP project, with a focus on the wider landscape and regional context, and in particular a discussion of the temple's location. It is hoped that a fuller publication of the temple to include all architectural details will eventually be available<sup>7</sup>.

The structure is a medium sized temple with a distyle in antis plan, on a typical east-west axis (fig. 2), standing on a rectangular podium that rises some 1.30 m above the current ground level. The exterior of the temple itself measures 17.60 m × 9.40 m, corresponding very roughly to 60 × 30 Roman feet. The podium extends some 7.70 m in front of the pronaos to the east, in the form of a paved platform. Stubs of the wall separating the cella from the pronaos are still visible, as well as what seem to be the bases of two columns in the front of the pronaos (although without some clearance work of fallen masonry, the existence of column bases cannot be confirmed). It is not currently possible to reconstruct the design of the entablature or pediment of the temple. In front of temple platform to the east lie the remains of a temenos wall, although it is impossible to discern the original size and dimensions of this temenos.

5 Durugönül 2001, 159–160; Durugönül 1998, 331.

6 E.g. Giobbe 2013.

7 Dürügönül 2001, 159 note 24.



**Fig. 2** Plan of the Roman temple at Arıkuyusu (© plan by Cristina Kolb)

The walls of the temple are made from local dark blue-grey limestone, are constructed in *opus quadratum* with an isodomic style, and in some places are still standing to a height of more than 4 m above the floor of the podium (fig. 3). The faces of the blocks are well dressed, and the facades are set with flat pilasters with Attic bases – seven pilasters are placed at two metre intervals along the longer south and north walls, while four pilasters are placed along the shorter west wall (fig. 4). It has been suggested that the pilasters were in the Corinthian order<sup>8</sup>, but until a full architectural analysis of the fallen masonry is undertaken, this remains unclear. A vertical series of putlog holes on the interior of the south wall should probably be interpreted as the remains of scaffolding supports used in the construction process. Overall, the architectural form and



**Fig. 3** Photograph of the Roman temple at Arıkuyusu (© image: Stuart Eve)

<sup>8</sup> Dürügönül 2001, 159.





**Fig. 4** South wall (© photograph: Nazlı Evrim Şerifoğlu)

construction techniques suggest that it was originally built in the Roman imperial period, perhaps in the mid-second century AD. We can only speculate about the deity or deities to whom this temple was dedicated, although local cults of Pan, Hermes, and Zeus are attested as being particularly strong in the region, albeit taking somewhat unusual and localised forms<sup>9</sup>.

Other temples of the Roman Imperial period from Rough Cilicia can provide helpful comparisons. Two in particular display notable similarities – the Tychaion at Nephelis, and a temple thought to have been dedicated to Zeus at Colybrassus. The Tychaion at Nephelis was a small tetrastyle temple, constructed in an almost identical manner to the Arıkuyusu building with *opus quadratum* in neat isodomic style, featuring engaged pilasters with Attic bases<sup>10</sup>. While the upper portions of the Arıkuyusu temple have not survived, the Tychaion at Nephelis is preserved as far as the entablature and even the pediment, and therefore the capitals of its pilasters remain visible – in plain, square Tuscan order. The proposed Zeus Temple at Colybrassus offers another good comparison, this time sharing the Arıkuyusu temple's distyle *in antis* plan. Once more we find local limestone employed for *opus quadratum* in isodomic style, as well as engaged pilasters with Attic bases<sup>11</sup>. However, at Colybrassus the pilaster capitals are in Ionic

<sup>9</sup> Lytle 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Karamut – Russell 1999, 357–359; Giobbe 2013, 130.

<sup>11</sup> Pohl 2002, 206 fig. 1. 3 pl. 1. 1; Giobbe 2013, 136.

rather than Tuscan order, resembling examples from Perge, Hierapolis, Sagalassos, and elsewhere in Anatolia<sup>12</sup>. The Nephelis and Colybrassus temples, while pointing to two potentially different possibilities for the design of the Arikuyusu column capitals, both indicate a similar date for its construction.

The closest stylistic comparisons for the Colybrassus temple all belong to the second century AD, suggesting that it should also be tentatively placed within this time frame. The date of the Nephelis temple is more firmly fixed, thanks to an inscription describing the building as a Tychaion erected in the reign of Antoninus Pius c. 150 CE. Given these parallels, we can provisionally date the construction of the temple at Arikuyusu to a similar date on stylistic grounds – around the middle of the second century AD. Such a date would be plausible, as it matches with the second main period of documented temple-building in Rough Cilicia (see table 1), and may be linked to the reorganisation of the province to combine Cilicia, Isauria and Lycaonia<sup>13</sup>. The first main period of temple building was in the early first century AD, linked to the Vespasianic dissolution of the client kinships, and the establishment of the new Roman province of Cilicia<sup>14</sup>.

After the period of its initial use, the temple at Arikuyusu seems to have been adapted later in its history, perhaps for use as a church in late antiquity. At least one block of masonry was carved with a cross (fig. 5), and the structure of the building was significantly modified. The west wall in particular underwent major adaptations. First and most obvious, three doorways were cut into it. These doorways respect the lines of the pilasters, but are not entirely symmetrical in their arrangement, suggesting that pragmatism rather than aesthetics was the driving motivation. Then, higher up on the west wall, two windows appear to have been created, each formed by the removal of a single block of stone, although it is not entirely clear whether these are indeed windows as the masonry has partially collapsed. Finally, in the upper central portion of the west wall, two rectangular niches of about 30 cm height seem to have been carved into the wall's exterior face, perhaps designed to hold small statues (fig. 6). These niches are aligned with the lower rail of the windows, at roughly 4 m above the floor of the podium.

Whatever this secondary usage may have been, over the centuries the temple has also clearly served as a quarry for the local community. Surrounding *yaylas* or farmsteads contain many architectural fragments, including column bases and capitals, as well as pieces of architrave and fascia. While some of these may date from the period of the temple's initial construction, others do not seem to have come from the temple in its original architectural form – one column capital, for example, appears to be Late Antique in date (fig. 7). This later spolia therefore either represents architectural features that were added to the temple in its later phase of use, or they come from

12 See Giobbe 2013, note 70.

13 Pilhofer 2020, 98.

14 Dürügönül 2001; Spanu 2013.





**Fig. 5** Cross (© photograph: Anna Collar)



**Fig. 6** West wall (© photograph: Nazlı Evrim Şerifoğlu)





**Fig. 7** Late Roman column capital, reused in agricultural setting (© photograph: Naoise Mac Sweeney)

another structure entirely. No trace of this possible other later structure remains today *in situ* however, although several other concentrations of masonry lie scattered around the basin, many partially reused for modern terracing or walls, and these may have once been the remains of a church or other monumental building.

Ceramics found on the surface are not especially helpful for reconstructing the history of the site. The temple is surrounded by a loose scatter of sherds from the Roman imperial period and from the Late Roman period, including parts of roof tiles, storage vessels, and transport amphorae. The rims of one Hellenistic amphora and one Middle Iron Age bowl were found, raising the question of how far back into antiquity the site was in use. In the absence of more substantive finds from these earlier periods however, the longevity of the site must remain an open question. Other finds from the site include two glass rim sherds of likely Late Roman date, one large bronze coin (its markings were eroded and no longer visible to the naked eye), and several pieces of iron



slag, suggesting the presence of a metalworking installation nearby. These pieces of slag became the first clue that the temple did not stand alone in an empty space, but was originally surrounded by a wider landscape which hosted a range of ritual, social, and economic activities.

## Context and landscape

The modern village of Arıkuyusu is located in the uplands of the Tauros Mountains at 680 m above sea level, amidst the rugged Taurus mountains that give *Cilicia aspera* (or 'Rough' Cilicia) its name. From the modern village, it is 33 km and 8 hours on foot from the nearest Roman town of *Claudiopolis* (modern Mut), and 64 km and 15 hours on foot from the regional capital of *Seleucia ad Calycadnum* (modern Silifke). Beyond these major towns, the closest known settlements of the Roman period are a string of small agricultural sites – Köserlerli, Maltepe and Şarlaktepe. These sites lie about 15 km and over 5 hours on foot northeast from Arıkuyusu, all at considerably lower elevations (160 m–200 m above sea level), as they are located at the edges of the fertile plain that stretches either side of the Göksu River. To reach the sea from Arıkuyusu today, one must traverse more than 30 km across uplands and mountain passes, a journey that would take over 12 hours on foot. The village is close to a regional route – a mountain pass that connects the rich lands of the Göksu River Valley with the coast, passing by the modern villages of Zeyne and Gülnar. Yet it does not lie directly on this route, but a rather awkward 4 km north of the modern road, perched in the hills overlooking it. By any measure therefore, the modern village of Arıkuyusu is remote. Visitors do not happen upon the village by accident, on their way between larger towns. Reaching it requires a deliberate and concerted effort.

If the modern village of Arıkuyusu is remote, then the area in Roman times would have been even more so. No Roman remains are documented in the modern village, only in the immediate vicinity of the temple, which stands in an agricultural basin southwest of the village, and to reach it the visitor must climb a further 200 m into the hills above the village, travelling by foot on steeply winding paths. Given its location, it might seem logical that the temple served a very restricted local community in the immediate vicinity, given the difficulty in accessing the site and its isolation from other settlements in the region. And yet the scale and the architectural elaboration of the temple are not what might be expected from a merely local shrine.

Table 1 lists temples in Rough Cilicia built during the Roman Imperial period for which the dimensions are known or can be extrapolated, placed in order from largest to smallest. It is evident that Roman temples from the region fall into three discrete categories. First, there are three large temples of truly monumental scale with a maximum length of 39 m–33 m, all located in major political centres. The first is at *Seleucia ad Calycadnum*, a settlement originally founded by Seleucus I Nicator where eventually the metropolis of the Roman province of Isauria. The second is at *Diocaesarea*, the seat of the priestly Teucid dynasty that controlled the region prior to Roman

**Tab. 1** Temples of the Roman Imperial period in Rough Cilicia with known dimensions  
(© Naoise Mac Sweeney)

Site	Date	Temple dedicated to	Dimensions (m)
Seleucia ad Calycadnum	Early 1 <sup>st</sup> century AD	?	39.2 × 21.8
Diocaesarea	Late 1 <sup>st</sup> century AD	Tyche	38.7 × 21.2
Elaiussa Sebaste	Early 1 <sup>st</sup> century AD	?	33.4 × 17.1
Diocaesarea Podium Temple	Early 1 <sup>st</sup> century AD?	?	18.0 × 10.0
Arikuyusu	Mid 2 <sup>nd</sup> century AD?	?	17.6 × 9.4
Syedra	?	?	17.1 × 10.3
Antiocheia ad Cragum	2 <sup>nd</sup> – 3 <sup>rd</sup> centuries AD	?	16.4 × 10.8
Colybrassus	2 <sup>nd</sup> century AD	Zeus?	12.9 × 7.9
Iotape	Early 2 <sup>nd</sup> century AD	Trajan	12.5 × 6.5
Laertes	Early 1 <sup>st</sup> century AD	?	12.3 × 6.9
Iotape	Early 2 <sup>nd</sup> century AD	Trajan or Hadrian?	12.1 × 6.6
Colybrassus	2 <sup>nd</sup> century AD	?	11.3 × 6.6
Laertes	2 <sup>nd</sup> century AD	Apollo?	10.2 × 6.7
Cestrus	Mid 2 <sup>nd</sup> century AD	Antoninus Pius	9.9 × 6.1
Lamus	Late 1 <sup>st</sup> century AD	Vespasian, Titus and Domitian	9.28 × 5.80
Cestrus	76 AD	Vespasian, Titus and Domitian	8.90 × 5.60
Nephelis	c. 150 AD	Tyche, Antoninus Pius	6.60 × 5.55

rule<sup>15</sup>. The third can be found at *Elaiussa Sebaste*, a settlement that rose to prominence as the royal home of the client king Archelaus during the reign of Augustus<sup>16</sup>. The location of truly monumental temples in these three major cities is entirely unsurprising.

There is then a major step down in scale from the large and monumental category to the medium-sized temples. These have a maximum length of 18 m–16.4 m. It is perhaps surprising to find that the temple at Arikuyusu, despite its remoteness and inaccessibility, belongs in this middle category, along with the Podium Temple at *Diocaesarea*<sup>17</sup>, a temple in the town of *Syedra*<sup>18</sup>, and one other from the city of *Antiocheia ad Cragum*<sup>19</sup>. All three of these settlements were significant locations of some regional importance. *Diocaesarea*, as already mentioned, was a royal centre in the Hellenistic period and

15 Strab. 14, 5, 10; Durugönül 1999.

16 Ios. ant. Iud. 16, 4, 6.

17 Wannagat 2005, 140–144.

18 Huber 1992, 72; Can 2017.

19 Erdogmus et al. 2021.

in the time of Roman client kings, and continued to be a populous and prosperous city later into the Roman imperial period. *Syedra* was an important enough city to be mentioned by the geographers Strabo<sup>20</sup> and Ptolemy<sup>21</sup>, to have minted its own coins<sup>22</sup>, and even came to the notice of the emperor Septimus Severus<sup>23</sup>. Finally, *Antiocheia ad Cragum* was known as an important pirate stronghold in the Hellenistic period<sup>24</sup>, received mentions from both Strabo<sup>25</sup> and Ptolemy<sup>26</sup>, and also minted its own coins<sup>27</sup>.

After the medium sized temples, there seems to be another significant step down in scale to the genuinely small temples, the maximum dimensions of which are less than 13 m, and which are by far the most common category, comprising more than half of the temples listed (ten out of the seventeen temples listed here). Yet despite their modest size, these temples were nonetheless significant public buildings, and are all known from towns or cities of some economic and political significance. All of these locations – *Iotape*, *Cestrus*, *Colybrassus*, *Laertes*, *Lamos*, and *Nephelis* – are known, for example, to have produced their own coinage<sup>28</sup>.

Arikuyusu is unique in this table. It alone was never a major settlement. It was never a regional administrative centre, a political seat, or an economic hub. It never boasted a substantial urban population, or appeared in the historical or epigraphic record. Indeed, it may not even have been a settlement at all. No traces of an urban zone or nucleated domestic occupation area have been found in the agricultural basin surrounding the temple, nor even in the wider area for several kilometres in any direction around it. Arikuyusu was certainly not a city or a town, and indeed, it may not even have been a village. The location of the Roman temple of Arikuyusu is, therefore, by all accounts utterly surprising. It is not the kind of place where archaeologists would normally expect to find such a large and impressive building. This begs the question – why was a monumental temple built here in the middle of the second century AD, seemingly in the middle of nowhere?

Clues can be found, as Günther might tell us, in the landscape. Firstly, we should note that while the temple was not located in any kind of settlement, this did not mean that the area was empty. Indeed, as mentioned above, there is ample evidence of human activity in the basin surrounding the temple. The LGASSP team have documented a number of features that are impossible to date firmly, but which may well have been used in Roman times. These include a number of stone-built animal enclosures; at least one wine or oil press carved into the rock; several storage vats carved into the rock; and debris from metalworking in the form of iron slag (mentioned above). We can

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20 Strab. 14, 5, 3.

21 Ptol. 5, 5, 3; 5, 8, 1.

22 Ziegler 1989, 24–29.

23 Jones 2015.

24 App. Mithr. 96.

25 Strab. 14, 5, 3.

26 Ptol. 5, 8, 2.

27 Ziegler 1989, 33.

28 Ziegler 1989; Imhoof-Blumer 1901.

perhaps tentatively conclude that the temple basin may have been a focus for industrial and other economic activity. Firmer evidence for the basin as a focal point comes in the form of several rock cut tombs hewn into the cliffs that ring the basin. These have been robbed, perhaps in antiquity, and their contents have long been lost. These tombs have not been formally documented nor fully published<sup>29</sup>, but for the most part they constitute single, simply carved chambers cut into the living rock, some with benches or *klinai*, most with a plain external facade. Overall, it seems that the Arıkuyusu basin was evidently a place where people congregated for cultic and economic activities, but also for collective and family rituals. There may have been no particular settlement associated with it, but it was nonetheless still a central place for a community that was distributed in a dispersed rather than a nucleated settlement pattern. At the heart of this community stood the temple – grand and imposing, and surely attracting visitors and pilgrims from further afield as well as serving the local population.

If the Arıkuyusu temple surprises us, this has more to do with our modern expectations than with antiquity. Indeed, the more we learn about Rough Cilicia in the Roman period, the more we find our expectations being challenged, with the realisation that things were often done differently here. It has long been remarked that urbanisation remained at relatively low levels in this region, or developed in unusual or idiosyncratic ways<sup>30</sup>. The people of Rough Cilicia simply did not choose to live close together in nucleated settlements on the same scale as their contemporaries elsewhere in the Roman world, opting instead for a more dispersed settlement structure. It is in this context that we should see the community at Arıkuyusu – a community that was wealthy enough to carve monumental tombs into the rock, that was productive enough to employ industrial scales of food processing, and that was influential enough to administer what must have been a temple of some regional significance and its cult. Indeed, Arıkuyusu was probably not the only community in the region that was spatially dispersed in this way. Several clusters of rock-cut tombs have been identified elsewhere in Rough Cilicia, similar to those found at Arıkuyusu, and these are only rarely associated with a nearby nucleated settlement<sup>31</sup>. All of this points to a more dispersed population structure in Rough Cilicia than what we might be used to seeing elsewhere in the Roman world. With all this in mind, the Roman temple at Arıkuyusu may perhaps be somewhat less surprising than initially assumed. While it may not have been located within a settlement, it was nonetheless at the heart of a community.

29 Their presence is noted without any comment in Rönnberg 2018, 191 map 3.

30 Spanu 2013; Spanu 2020; Rauh et al. 2009; Borgia 2017: for example, the rarity of the *agora*.

31 Iacomi 2013.



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