

The submerged seaport of Aperlae, Turkey

Robert S. Carter

Medina, Washington 98039, USA

The southernmost points of the Lycian coast of Turkey are the cape of Ulu Burun, accepted as being the *akrotiri* or *promontorium* of the Stadiasmus, and just east of it the island of İc Ada (Fig. 1). Between lies Asar Bay, two miles wide at its outer end and narrowing at its innermost end to only 200 yards (183 m). Of this bay the British Admiralty Sailing Directions say only: 'The coast from Ulu Burun to the head of Asar veya hisar limani, 5 miles ENE, appears to be steep to, but has only been partially examined'. For reasons given below, this bay was seldom visited by the travellers and archaeologists who began exploring this coast in

the 19th century. In the prevailing south-west day breeze it appears from seaward to be a cul-de-sac or trap for sailing vessels; the excellent harbours of Kekova Roads to the east and Kastelorizzo to the west are but a few miles distant; and in Asar Bay there was no village and no taverna to lure the Greek pilot to secure there.

Beaufort passed by the bay in 1811, to anchor in Kekova Roads, although he did take a shore party back across the narrow isthmus and noted the existence of ruins (Beaufort, 1818). Cockerell, in 1812, apparently also sailed directly past it (Cockerell, 1903), although he,

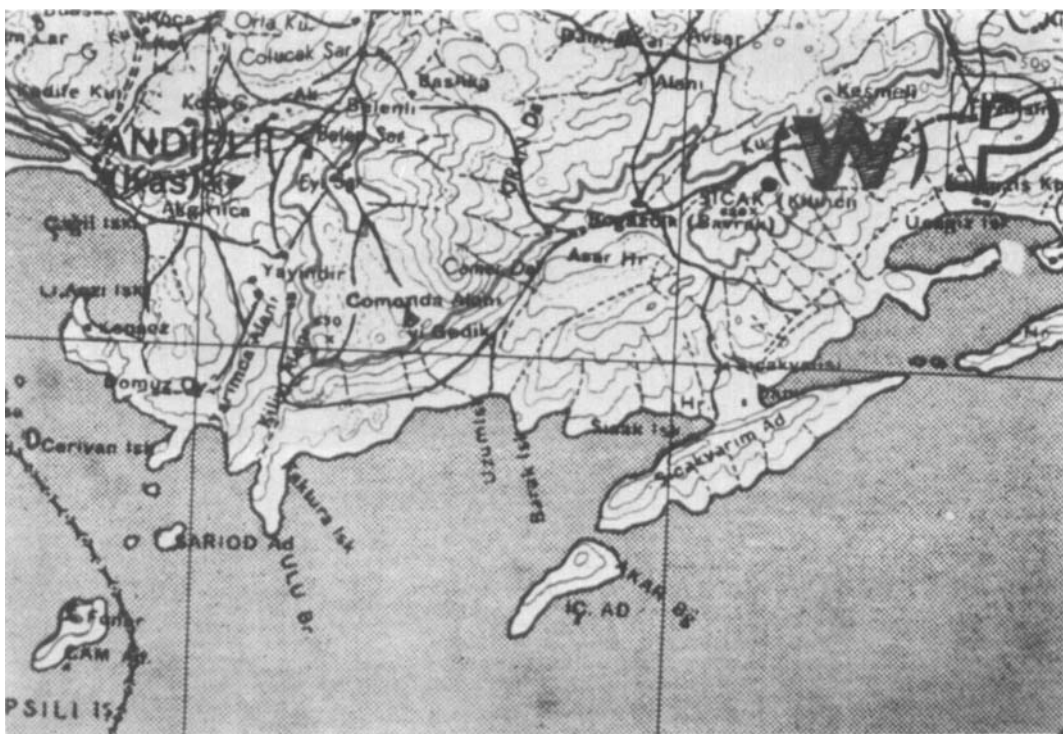


Figure 1. Map of Asar Bay and environs.

too, must have crossed the isthmus on foot, as he copied some inscriptions (Leake, 1824). Spratt (1847) travelled inland as did Fellows (1841), and neither saw Asar Bay. Texier (1849) was becalmed overnight in the mouth of Asar Bay, but did not enter it. The Petersen—von Luschan expedition in 1880 also passed by in their paddle-wheel steamer and secured in Kekova Roads and were able to report finally (Petersen, 1896), after identifying the locations of most of the 23 cities of the Lycian League:

‘Dann muss aber Aperlai von C. Müller und G.

Hirschfeld an der Assarbai richtig angesetzt sein, wo Ruinen sind, die seit Beaufort und Cockerell. Niemand, leider auch nicht ich, gesehen hat.’

For many centuries, however, a small commercial city had existed near the head of Asar Bay, which Col. Leake, without visiting it, had determined must be Aperlae, and despite the identification of half a dozen other sites as Aperlae (even today the 1977 Fodor Guide to Turkey places Aperlae at the site of Kekova Kale, ancient Simena), there is general agree-

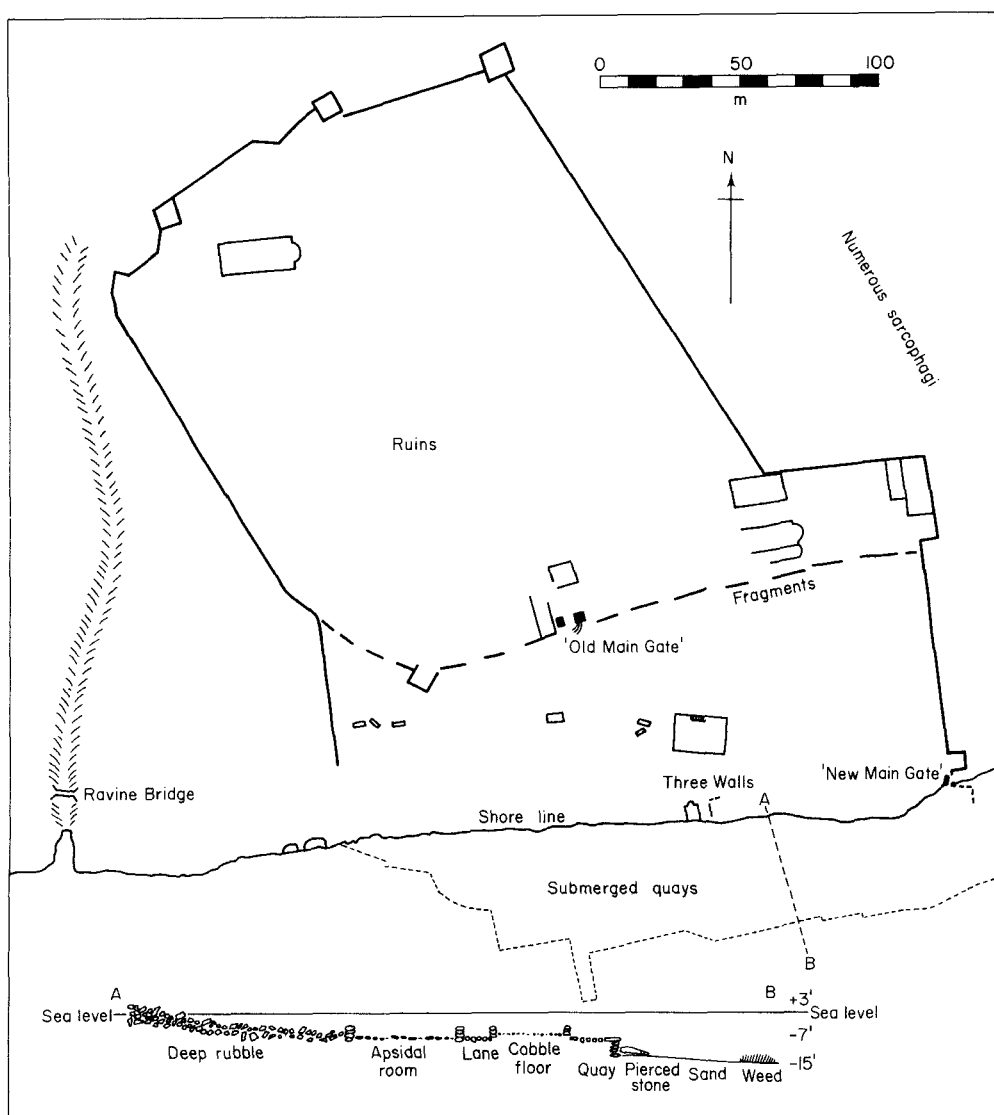


Figure 2. Plan of the site of Aperlae.

ment now with the conclusions of Leake, Müller (1882), Hirschfeld (1885), Hill (1897), and later classicists. In 1890 Benndorf (1892) was here and reversed an earlier identification of Aperlae with Kekova. In 1958 George Bean (1958) came here to copy inscriptions, and the number of published inscriptions indicates other visitors in the past. Modern travellers have tended to cloud the identity, which I mention only to point out that I am talking about the site on Asar Bay. Freya Stark's *The Lycian Shore* pictures their boat in Asar Bay, captioned 'Polemos (?)', but skips it in the text, placing Aperlae at Kekova; this was repeated by John Marriner (1970), by Henry Denham (1973) and by Flemming (1973). 'Polemos' is the term used by the Admiralty Sailing Directions for the west end of Kekova Roads. Although Marriner refers obliquely to underwater ruins, it appears that they have never been described.

Having visited the site in 1970 and then determined the above facts, my wife, Cynthia, and I spent two weeks here in 1975, anchored in Asar Bay in our small sailing boat, and revisited the site in 1976 and 1977 to complete our notes. Let me make it clear that we are not professional archaeologists, that we were well aware of Turkish regulations which prohibit scuba diving, digging, lifting or moving of objects, or detailed measurements or even of site surveys without permits and supervision. We are, however, trained observers, have a sailor's eye for bearings and distances, and could legally photograph, sketch and describe the surface appearance of the site, above and beneath the water.

A brief description of what is visible above water is of use in establishing the chronology. As we sailed into Asar Bay, heading roughly ENE, there is a steep ridge to the south, shown as 1000 ft in height on the Admiralty chart. Ahead is a low, partially cultivated isthmus, separating Asar Bay from its geological continuation in Kekova Roads about a mile to the east. To the north a broken hillside rises less steeply than the southern shore to a plateau at about 200 ft (60.96 m), backed by higher mountains. A few hundred yards from the inner end of the bay, on the northern shore, lay the ruins of the walled city climbing the hillside, the walls coming almost to the water's edge and

the foundations of the buildings continuing into the water to a depth of about 2 m, where they stopped along a well-defined quay, the water depth increasing immediately to 4 m and more (Fig. 2). Where the city walls approached the sea they were about 250 m apart, and the linear extent of the submerged port area would have been about 300 m. But it is immediately apparent that the original walls did not come to the shore line. These walls from a point about 100 m up the hillside, are of heavy unmortared ashlar construction to a height of six courses or more (4 m), topped with rubble and mortar, while the continuation of these walls toward the shore is of rubble and mortar from the ground up, c. 1.5 m in thickness. It is probably safe to assume that the earlier type of construction is Hellenistic, and vestigial remains of a connecting wall of the same massive construction can be traced along the contour roughly parallel to the shore, including one well preserved square tower and the foundations of others, and a heavy gateway with guard tower and steep approach, all of massive and undecorated stone. Within the later walls and as far as the present littoral, many buildings now stand, constructed of blocks which could well have been quarried from the old walls during the centuries of Roman peace. At a later time the walls were rebuilt, possibly in some haste, and extended to the shore, but there is no evidence of rebuilding the former lateral wall which was parallel to the shore. This rebuilding seems to have taken place during the Christian era; Aperlae is mentioned in the *Notitiae* as the seat of a bishopric and we find the capital of a column from the basilica used as a building block at the base of one section of wall. So it may be reasonable to assume that Aperlae flourished as a small seaport community from the 3rd century BC well into the Christian era, quite possibly until the middle of the 7th century, when the Arab invasions devastated this coast; Rhodes was taken in 654. It has been noted that the history of this last period 'is veiled in the most profound obscurity' (Bury, 1889).

If we are correct in assuming the existence of a port here for a period of nearly 1000 years, I think we must assume many generations of rebuilding and overbuilding and backfilling, and doubtless a certain amount of silting, although

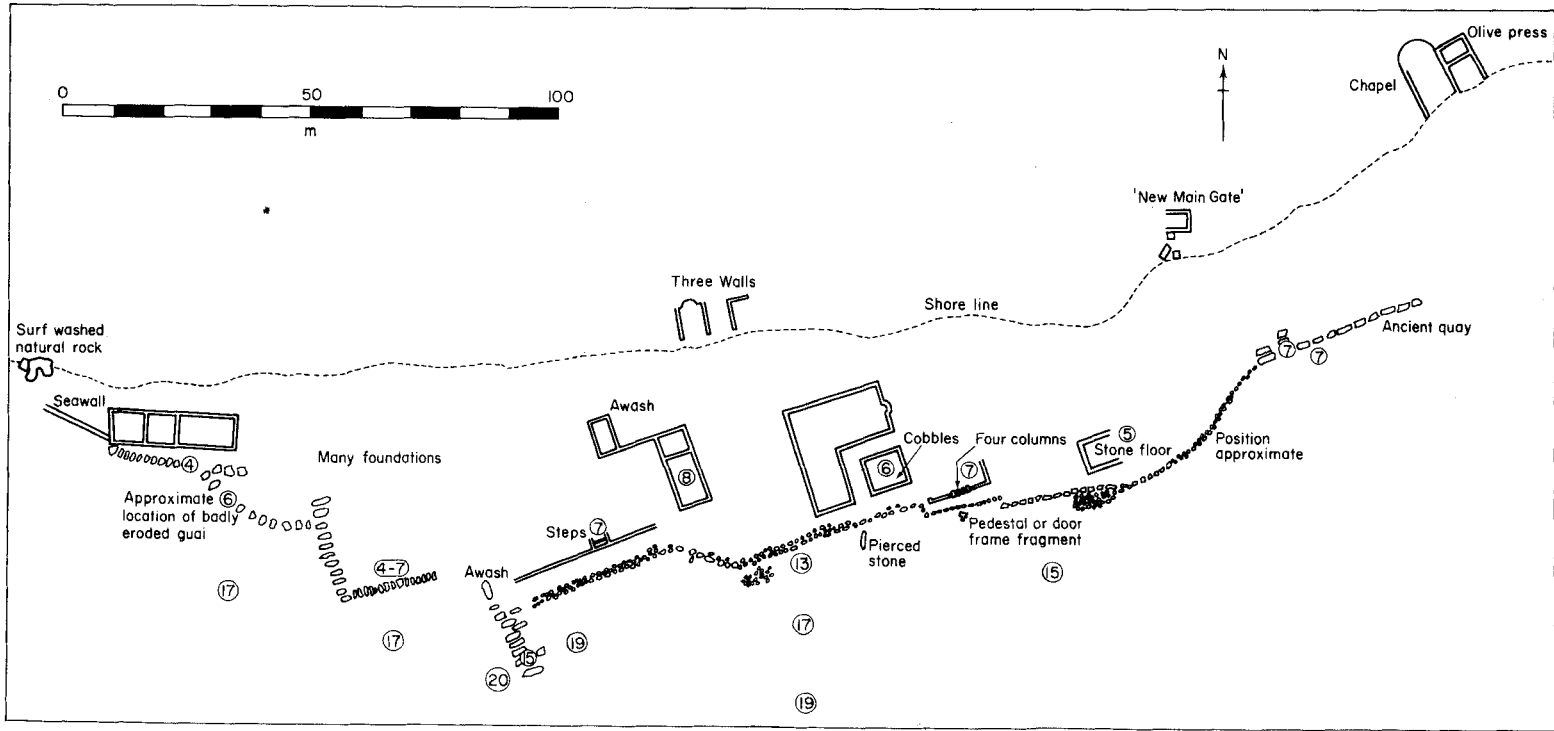


Figure 3. Plan of port area.



Figure 4. Asar Bay looking west from the walls of Aperlae.



Figure 5. The submerged port from the south side of Asar Bay.

the port was fortunate in having no river debouching into it. Since it has subsided at a rate which must be nearly 2 m per millenium (the only way to account for quays being submerged to a depth of 2 m, when 1300 years ago they must have stood high enough to avoid frequent inundation), it may be reasonable to assume that this rate of submergence occurred during its active period and that the port had to be built up from time to time; this may account for the comparatively flat shelf on a shore which is, as the Admiralty Sailing Directions indicate, 'steep to'.

But let us look at the existing remains (Figs 3–6). The principal works of the submerged port begin at the west end at a point where the west wall came to the shore. Beneath the water a seawall leaves the present shoreline and the foundation of a lengthy building with three rooms apparently made of rubble and mortar poured into forms can be discerned. The seawall is built out rather abruptly into the harbour, its upper edge capped with large stones, up to 2 m in length, set as headers; the depth directly outside ranged from 4 to 6 m.

About 60 m to the east a stone pier extends into the bay, c. 23 m on its west face and 17 m on its east face, nearly 5 m in width. This would have doubled as a minor breakwater for boats moored behind it. It seemed that the farther east one searched along the line of the quay, the older the masonry seemed to appear. Toward the east end there was less use of forms in construction, and of brick and tile fragments. Finally, east of the east city wall we found a long line of large stones at a depth of 2 m plus, with the depth of water outside perhaps only 0.10 m deeper, sea grass growing around on all sides. Is it possible that this is a more ancient quay and that silt has been carried out this far?

The face of the quay stepped out at frequent intervals, usually with a change in the type of construction, probably representing a different period of building. Many of the straight sections are about 15 m in length, which we note is conformable to the size of the small Byzantine coastal traders. At one point, just beneath the face of the quay, lies a heavy stone, at least 2 m in length, with a hole pierced through one end, possibly a mooring stone

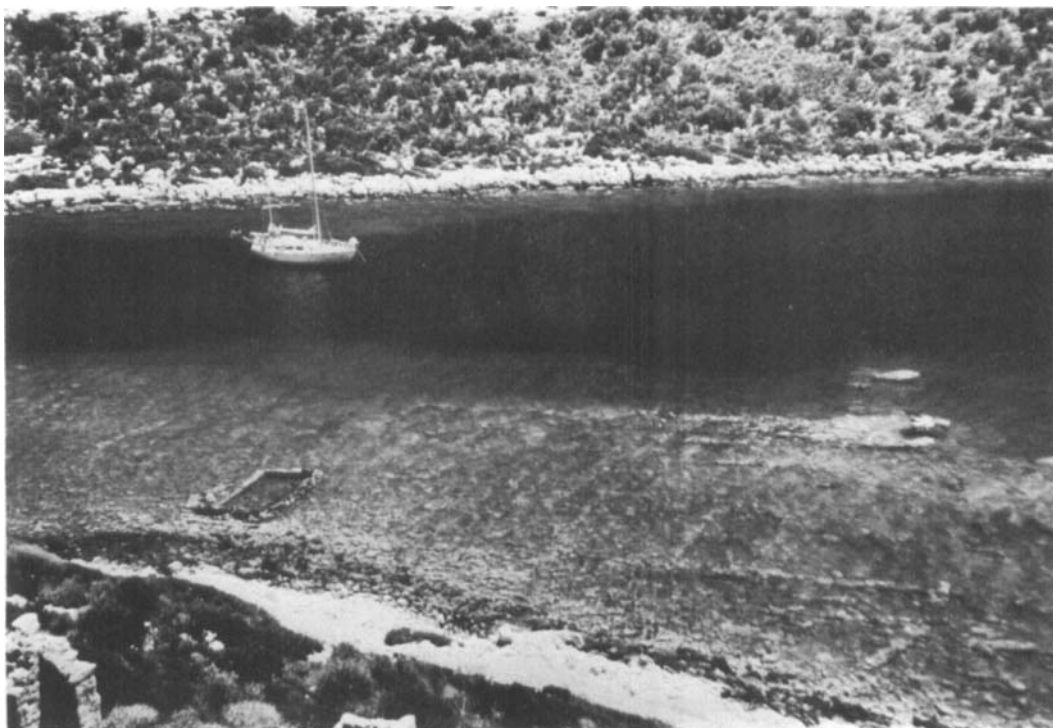


Figure 6. The submerged port area from the city walls.



Figure 7. Submerged stone foundations.

washed from the quay. A few metres east of this, a block of cut stone shaped very much like a pedestal lies on the harbour floor.

The shelf between the present shore and the edge of the quays averages about 50 m or less in width and slopes gently. It is literally covered with foundations, some conspicuous, some eroded and overlapping older lines of stone (Fig. 7). Buildings in general are set back from the quays about 4 m, although in places they approach more closely. South-west of the east city wall is a building with a floor of large flat stones still in place. About 25 m to the west is a foundation, the south wall of which contains four columns laid into the footing at right angles to it. Immediately west of this is a small room, with sides of 7 or 8 m, the floor of which consists of baseball-sized cobble stones, evidently the base of a tile floor, as fragments of the large square floor tiles still exist around the edges. All these buildings lie in about 2 m of water. Just to the north of the last, and in slightly less water, lies a foundation with a small apse in its east wall.

That these buildings were embellished with a certain amount of decoration is evident not only from the rare bits of column, of carved capital, or of marble to be seen under the water, but more from the nature of the rubble beach which marks the present shore. This is composed of the superstructure of the buildings underwater, washed away by centuries of storms and badly battered, but in which we have observed many pieces of various marbles, squared blocks, mouldings, and mosaic fragments. This rubble extends over 200 m with a maximum width of over 10 m and piled to a depth of perhaps 1.5 m.

Back on land we noted one feature which we have not observed at other sites. To the west of the city, across a small ravine spanned by a stone arch bridge, is a barren slope composed almost entirely of shell fragments and broken potsherds. There is a quantity of murex shell, and one must wonder if a dye works is indicated, although the answer may be more prosaic; the mortar of the city uses a heavy mix of crushed shell and pottery and this may have

simply been their supply dump. Another feature to note is the profusion of Lycian sarcophagi dotting the hillside to the east of the city walls, and extending now into the water (Fig. 8). There must be at least 50 in various stages of preservation, many bearing legible inscriptions. We should also note that we came across a column, now serving as the lintel of an opening into a vaulted chamber, bearing an inscription which proved to be the Le Bas-Waddington No. 1293, but a squeeze revealed an unrecorded line which established this as a milestone dedicated by Aperlae to the Emperors Diocletian and Maximian and the Caesars, Constantius and Galerius, thus dating it between 293 and 305.

Other features to mention are the numerous guard towers whose remains are still visible to the west of the city. There are four overlooking the north shore of Asar Bay at various intervals, including one at the head of each of the two creeks which might have provided landings, and one at the point where the land trail passes over the saddle of the mountain separating Asar Bay from Faktira to the west, the next landing site,

and one on Ic Ada. These are all of Hellenistic construction and it seems clear that the sea approaches were of paramount importance.

A search for wrecks was not within our scope. We carried no scuba gear nor detection devices, nor would their use have been proper. But it would seem probable that wrecks may exist in the area. The ordinary route between Aperlae and the east leads through the Kara Bogaz or Akar Bogaz (it appears in both ways and either, Black Strait or Current Strait, is applicable) inside Ic Ada, which, as Beaufort mentions, is noted for its strong current and squally winds. Asar Bay itself can be a rough body of water and while the strength of the sea is largely dissipated along the shores before it reaches Aperlae, it would seem probable that over the years, some boats must have been caught and foundered in south-westerly storms.

Aperlae was not a great city. There are no monuments, no theatre, no temples extant. It was at one time the chief city of a sympolity of four cities, appears to have issued its own coinage and to have been at times the seat of a bishopric. But the general impression is of a



Figure 8. A sarcophagus standing in the water.

small commercial city. Its virtue today may lie in the fact that it has been so little observed and remains untouched since its abandonment, so that it presents a comparatively undisturbed site where both underwater and on land observations may be co-ordinated. And who knows what may still lie under the silt of the harbour or the rubble of the beach.

We have reported our observations to Hikmet Gurcay at the Department of Antiquities in Ankara and to the Antalya Museum, whose nautical archaeologist, Oğuz Alpözen, subsequently visited the site and reported it in the magazine, *Türkiyemiz*. We are pleased that its existence is now known to the authorities who can judge whether further exploration is justified.

References

- Bean, G., 1958, Die Lage von Phallou, *Anz. der W. Akad.*, V. 95, 12. Vienna.
 Beaufort, Sir F., 1818, *Karamania*. London.
 Benndorf, O., 1883, *Vorläufiger Bericht über zwei Oesterreichischer. Expeditionen nach Kleinasien*. Vienna.
 Benndorf, O., 1892, Über eine Reise im Orient. *Anz. der Ph. Hist. Classe. der Wiener Akademie*, XVIII, Vienna.
 Bury, J. B., 1889, *History of the Later Roman Empire*. London.
 Cockerell, C. R., 1903, *Travels in Southern Europe and the Levant*. New York.
 Denham, H., 1973, *Southern Turkey, the Levant and Cyprus*. London.
 Fellows, Sir C., 1841, *Discoveries in Lycia*. London.
 Flemming, N., 1971, *Cities in the Sun*. New York.
 Flemming, N. C., 1973, Archaeological evidence for eustatic and tectonic components of relative sea-level change in the south Aegean, in Blackman, D. J., Ed. *Marine Archaeology*. 23 Colston symposium. London.
 Hill, G. F., 1897, *Catalogue of Greek Coins in the British Museum: Lycia*. London.
 Hirschfeld, G., 1885, *Das Gebiet von Aperlai*. Berlin.
 Kalinka, E., 1897, *Bericht über zwei Reisen im südwestlichen Kleinasien*. Vienna.
 Leake, W. M., 1824, *Journal of a Tour in Asia Minor*. London.
 Magie, D., 1950, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor*. Princeton.
 Marriner, J., 1970, *Journey into the Sunrise*. London.
 Müller, C., 1882, *Geographi Graeci Minores*. Paris.
 Petersen, E., 1896, *Reisen in Südwestlichen Kleinasien*. Vienna.
 Spratt, T. A. B., 1847, *Travels in Lycia etc.* London.
 Texier, C., 1849, *Asie Mineure*. Paris.
 Texier, C., 1862, *Description de l'Asie Mineure*. Paris.
 Tomaschek, W., 1891, Zur historischen Topographie von Kleinasien im Mittelalter, *SB der W. Akad.*, Ph. CXXXIV.