

Date: 07/04/2011 Place: Kesan, Turkey

Kms walked: 2600kms

Yes – I am now in Turkey – but first

After Thessaloniki the route climbed over a lowish ridge and descended into a valley that ran eastwards for several days walk. I had the good fortune to stay one night in a beautiful hotel at a thermal springs. My room had a superb view out over the lake. Next morning saw me striding down the road feeling reasonably cheerful. The weather was a bit dreary after beautiful, warm sunshine the day previously but at least it had stopped raining. I was on the approximate route of St Paul when he travelled to Thessaloniki from Philippi and hoped to stop for breakfast at a village 7kms away called Apollonia which is shown on the map of his second missionary journey (see the link <http://www.rcdow.org.uk/paul/> , scroll down to see maps of his journeys) - although the town marked on the map is spelt Appolonia and is placed on the coast, about 20kms away. Still, I would not be a million miles away from where he would have been. To my delight there was a café there so I ordered a coffee and a cheese-filled flaky pastry thing and gratefully sat down. Imagine my absolute dismay when, on digging in my pocket for my purse I pulled out the key to my previous night's hotel room! It was yet another "I just don't believe it" moment, though of the 'not so good' kind. What was I to do? The hotel was 7kms back the way I had come and the total distance I aimed to cover that day was already about 27kms. I started thinking about my options. Should I try and get a bus back? As if to answer that question a bus went sailing past. I knew the next would not be for a couple of hours. Should I try and hitch-hike back? Should I just continue to my destination and put the key in the post at the next available opportunity?

The last option was by far the most tempting but I knew I would not have a peaceful walk unless I was certain the key had been returned. So when I finished breaky I turned round and set off back to the hotel deciding to catch a bus from there to the next village after this one, that way I would still reach my destination for the day, even with the delay of waiting for the bus back. I would only have a gap of about 5kms to make up the next day. By now the weather had improved considerably and the grey skies were turning blue and 'the sun had got its hat on!'. It was St Patrick's Day and as I left the café I turned on my music player and selected a Chieftan's CD. The 1st track was a lively exuberant tune and the situation in which I found myself was so ridiculous I had to laugh and then the music got the better of me and I danced my way down the road and out of Apollonia!

The hotel receptionist was somewhat surprised when I returned 4hrs after having left that morning. She was even more surprised to find out why! They obviously hadn't missed the key yet. She was very kind and rang the bus company to find out the time of the next bus and allowed me to wait in the comfortable lounge area. I only had to wait just over 30mins which was great and I eventually reached my destination in good time.



Heading out from Thessaloniki into the next valley



Roadside 'kantina' for a welcome rest-stop & cold drink

By now I was back on the coast though just for 1 night.



Walking again in flat landscape



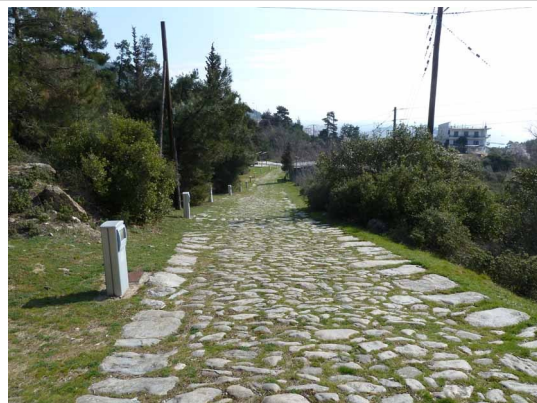
....and arriving at the sea again

My journey continued relatively uneventfully after that until I reached the outskirts of Kavala. Again the route had gone inland and followed a valley though this time it went through hillside villages before descending at the end of the valley and then climbing up another high ridge above Kavala, the port at which St Paul landed when he made his journey to Philippi. It was at this point I made an really exciting discovery. As I gazed out over the town I spotted what looked like an old road just below and to the right of the modern tarmac. It was about 20 feet below me & I wondered if I could get down to it – it seemed to lead towards to Kavala. Tracing its path backwards I saw a promising way down. So off I went to investigate. Yes I could get to the road and yes it had all the hallmarks of an old Roman Road, similar to sections of the Via Francigena I had encountered in Italy. As I followed it down I felt sure it must be the ancient, original Via Egnatia and if this *was* the case it would have been the same road on which St Paul had walked to Philippi. Imagine! I could be walking on the very same stones as St Paul.

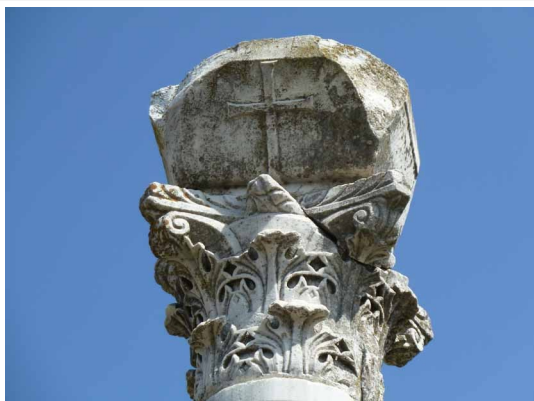
When I reached Kavala I went to the Tourist Office and again Yes. It was the old Via Egnatia. When I told her I was on a pilgrimage the girl there said “You must walk in the footsteps of St Paul, on the old Via Egnatia. Everyone goes to Philippi looking for it but it is here in Kavala.” And she showed me on the map the road I had walked down that morning. I was so pleased I had seen it and been able to find a way down onto it. She also told me that close to Philippi is located the site of the first baptism in Europe. I decided there and then that I should stay in Kavala a couple of nights and take a detour by bus to Philippi, effectively the birthplace of Christianity in Europe. It was well worth it. Philippi is a very impressive archaeological site – much larger than I expected, and to stand beside the river where the first baptism in Europe had taken place ... well, words can't describe it.



Pause for prayer at a roadside shrine – notice the lit flame



An exciting find - walking on the old Via Egnatia, in the footsteps of St Paul



Visit to Philippi – early Christian symbols



The prison of St Paul at Philippi

There is a very well preserved theatre there & I sat down and read St Paul's Letter to the Philippians wondering whether he had preached at that spot.

The weather had been warming up and a few days before Kavala I had been contemplating camping but then weather changed again, becoming colder and even wet on occasions. But it now it turned again and I started thinking again about camping but at the same time was a little apprehensive about the dogs. The main problem seemed to have been in the Florina area and since then I had not met the packs of stray dogs I had met there. Then as though to re-assure me, out of the blue I met a cyclist, a Swiss chap who was cycling to China. He was camping wild and said it was OK, he had not had problems with dogs while camping and he found it warm enough. Then the next day more re-assurance, I met more cyclists. This time a French couple who were cycling home from Cambodia. They had come from Iran and cycled to the south of Turkey and then taken the coast route for which I was heading. They gave me some good tips about camping in Turkey as well as telling me how kind and hospitable they had found the people to be.

A couple of days later it seemed warm enough & I took the plunge and camped. Mind you I didn't have much choice as there was no other accommodation! It was OK. Still a tiny bit on the chilly side but bearable. I camped for 4 nights in a row. One of my pitches was stunning – on a hill overlooking the sea – see picture below. I reached Alexandroupoli where I had intended to have a rest day anyway so wanted to stay in a hotel. It was soooooo good to have a shower! I had timed it just right as well because the weather changed yet again and when I walked out of Alexandroupoli it was bitterly cold. So much so that in addition to my jacket I had to wear my 'neck-warmer' which previously had been consigned to the bottom of the rucksack as not needed.



My little tent – in case you had forgotten what it looked like



The view from my 'bedroom' window

After Alexandroupoli it was just a few days to reach the border of Turkey but getting across was a different matter. I presented my passport to the 1st window. It was labelled 'Police'.

“Where is your car?” the policeman said.

“I don't have one, I am on foot” I replied.

“You cannot cross by foot” came the answer, “The soldiers will shoot you”.

“What must I do, I have no car?” I asked.

“Go into the restaurant and phone for a taxi. There is a number there” he said.

So that is what I did. The taxi took 2 hours to arrive – unfortunately I had phoned at his busy time. I occupied myself catching up on my diary. As I sat there I wondered where I would end up that night. My day's journey had already been lengthened by taking an incorrect route (again!) and it was now coming up for 19:00. It would be dark by about 20:00 and the 1st town on the Turkish side was about an hours walk away, and I didn't even know if there was a hotel there. Still, I felt things would be OK. Faith was telling me things would be OK and I continued to wait, calmly. The taxi duly turned up and took me across the bridge to just in front of the Turkish border. I had thought it was the Turkish army on guard but it was the Greek army which I found surprising.

I presented myself to the 1st window. It was also labelled 'Police'

“Where is your car?” the policeman said

“I came by taxi” I replied, pointing back to the taxi from which I had just emerged and thankfully had not yet driven off.

The policeman scrutinised the taxi and then nodded and told me I needed to get a Visa, pointing over to the Visa Office. I asked about changing money & he said I could do that at the shopping centre just opposite. So I got my Visa, changed money for Turkish Lira, left my pilgrim staff behind in the exchange office but luckily realised I had done so & retrieved it **before** I returned to the border post and re-presented myself to the policeman. He let me pass.

I then went to the next window which was labelled 'Customs'.

“Where is your car?” came the question.

By now the taxi had actually gone and for a moment I thought I would not be allowed to cross the border.

“I came by taxi” I replied, “the policeman saw it”, hoping the policeman would vouch for me and the existence of the taxi. My passport & Visa were examined, the official smiled and I was told to go ahead. I relaxed and set off down the road. By 19:35 I was passing the “Welcome to Turkey” sign. To my enormous relief I came to a hotel just 15mins later and by 20:00 was in my room.



I'm in Turkey at last



A very welcome site that night

And what of my onward journey in the light of what is happening in the Middle East, especially Syria? Well, I will not reach Syria for another couple of months yet by which time things may have been peacefully resolved. I will take stock nearer the time and if there is still trouble in any of the countries on my route, then I will have to change direction even if that means taking a ferry for the same reason as I took buses across Albania. I know I am protected but not so that I can take stupid risks.

So I ask you all to pray/chant/think good thoughts/whatever for Peace, especially for Peace in those countries on my route - if for no other reason so that I am able to cross them by foot and continue my pilgrimage in safety.

Take care and God Bless

Ann

Oh yes – forgot, a kind of PS

Found another way of going wrong despite hints that might have alerted me to my mistake!

You know the way a river normally flows towards the sea, and you know that if you want to go towards the sea you should walk downstream? Well my route caused me to ford a river (it entailed taking boots and socks off and doing it in bare feet) so I knew which direction it was flowing. I wanted to follow it towards the sea. However I resolutely followed it for 4kms upstream without twigging I was going in the wrong direction.

But sure it was a lovely dirt road, a joy to walk on. And if I hadn't made that mistake I would never have met yet another French cyclist who had been following the Silk Road though had started from somewhere ending in 'istan' as he hadn't had time to start from China.

OK that's it. Next bulletin from who knows where – although it will probably be somewhere in Turkey, it's quite a big country.