The Anastasian Wall: A Neglected Byzantine Monument

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by proverbs6to10

The Anastasian Walls were built about 500 AD by the Emperor Anastasias. They stretch from the Marmara to the Black Sea. Although often mentioned in the history of the Empire during raids, particularly by the Bulgars, very little is known about them today. To correct this I am very pleased to be able to bring you this superb article by someone who is probably the leading authority on the Walls, Dr Michael A McAdams. I am sure Michael would welcome any comments you have and any support you can give to his work.

by Michael A. McAdams
Department of Political Science
State University of New York-Fredonia
Fredonia, New York, USA

e-mail: Michael.Mcadam[at]fredonia.edu
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Introduction

Approximately 70 kilometers from the centre of Istanbul, is a Byzantine or Late Roman period wall, constructed and reconstructed from approximately 500 to 600 C.E. by a variety of Byzantine emperors. The majority of the wall was constructed apparently during the reign of the Emperor Anastasias (491-515 C.E.), – hence the name ‘the Anastasian Wall.’ It was approximately 50 kilometers long stretching from the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea, ranking it as one of the longest walls in ancient times. It is relatively unknown – as compared to the Great Wall of China or Hadrian’s Wall. The wall corridor consists of earthen mounds, stone walls, towers and ancillary buildings. This unique cultural monument is being threatened by modern farming, road construction, increasing exurban and suburban development, mining, forestry and treasure hunters. Although a significant portion is no longer visible, approximately 20 kilometers is still evident making it an impressive historic architectural structure. It is crucial that the wall is more extensively documented and properly protected (i.e., designation as a national historic park and/or a UNESCO World Heritage Site.)

Brief History

The primary purpose of the wall, which stretched for approximately 50 kilometers from the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea in Thrace, was for defense against invading tribes. Most sources attribute the walls to the Late Roman/Early Byzantine Emperor Anastasias who appears to have constructed most of the wall about 500 A.C.E.—thus the name of the “Anastasian Wall.” However, there is some evidence that a portion was built early by his predecessor Zeno.
Additionally, the Emperor Justinian reconstructed the wall after its neglect and damage due to a great earthquake in 557 A.C.E. (Evans 2000.)

Beginning at approximately 5th Century, the western portion of the Roman Empire was facing increasing pressures from hostile groups (Huns, Bulgars, Vandals, etc.) and was beginning a slow decline into what would be later called the Middle Ages or Feudal period—which was a period of almost continual warfare among a pageant of a changing group of nations. Previously, the Empire had been able to maintain a semblance of its former form by making treaties, bribery or incorporating the tribes into the Empire. The western portion of the Roman Empire by this period was significantly weakened, while the eastern portion was still prospering. The term Byzantine Empire was pinned later by historians. The Emperors of the eastern portion of the existing Roman Empire perceived themselves as continuing the legacy of the Roman Empire and protectors of “true Christian faith.” Since the time of Constantine the Great, Rome had ceased to be the capital of the Roman Empire and was supplanted by Constantinople (modern day Istanbul) as its capital. Rome’s wealth steadily declined due to several raids led by a variety of Germanic tribes. While Rome declined, Constantinople increased its wealth and by the 5th Century, it was the wealthiest city in the Western and Central Asian regions and was a great prize for raiding groups (Williams and Friell, 1998).

Theodosius had built a wall around Constantinople in 400 A.C.E. which had effectively defended the city. Anastasias who was a prudent emperor perceived that another wall would provide additional protection, being the first line of defense against the tribes who wished to attack and raid Constantinople. The Bulgars had often raided the towns in Thrace and by the late 5th Century, their activity was increasing. Their interest was not territory, but loot. About 500 A.C.E., Anastasias started the construction of the set of walls stretching from the Marmara to the Black Sea. It was later reconstructed by Justinian. Both emperors also encouraged the construction of walls around cities in the vicinity of the wall (i.e. Selymbria-modern day Silivri). However, after about 700 A.C.E. the Anastasian Wall ceased to be manned because of the cost of maintaining and supplying troops along the wall and a decreased threat from the west. (Williams and Friell, 1998).

**Archaeological Surveys**

The Rectangular Corner Tower at Hisar Tepe, near Evcik. View from the North
Until recently, the wall was not well documented. The first major archaeological exploration of the wall was begun by the Archeology Department of the University of Newcastle led by James Crow in the late 1990s (Crow 1997.) The wall was followed by the Newcastle team from its beginnings at the Marmara to the Black Sea (University of Newcastle 2005) some of the visible portions of the wall were measured with a GPS portable station including some of the major forts. The most well preserved portions of the wall were in the center and the northern sections. In these sections, one can see portions of regularly hewn blocks amid ivy and other vegetation that grows along or on the walls. The southern section exists as mounds due to the walls being used in construction in buildings in surrounding villages or in other structures around Istanbul. At various places along the wall, there is evidence of other structures such as fort complexes. The evidence of underwater dock structures at the southern end has been documented by James Crow and his team (University of Newcastle 2005). Despite, significant portions of the wall being destroyed or covered by mounds, the visible remains are still impressive.

In 2008-10, a team of researchers led by Dr. Michael A. McAdams from Fatih University in Istanbul, Turkey used high resolution satellite images, both visible and infrared spectrum images, and a digital elevation map, to locate and provide coordinates for most of the length of the Wall with a fair degree of accuracy. Many of the sites were also visited and documented with photographs on numerous occasions. It was also found that there were other archaeological sites that were connected to the Wall that are in need of protection and documentation (McAdams et al. 2010A, 2009, 2008.) Although these efforts supplemented those of James Crow, it was determined by the team led by Dr. McAdams that more detail for the Wall area could be obtained using LIDA-active remote sensing using light reflection, than through the use of aerial photography, satellite images and GPS surveying. However, the cost of undertaking LIDAR imaging of the Anastasian Wall and other procedural problems prevented the team from pursuing the use of this technology. (For a detailed explanation of LIDAR and its use for archaeological discovery, see Crutchley (2010) and its possibilities.) It is still one of the goals of the team to use LIDAR imaging to further investigate the Anastasian Wall at a later date.

In addition to these efforts, a documentary film has was initiated in 2008 by firm of Valentine_Art under the direction of Valentine Danchev in cooperation with Alexi Danchev (producer) and the author (scriptwriter/creative consultant.) The purpose of the documentary is to not restricted to the architectural aspects of the Anastasian Wall but encompasses the overall economic, political, ecological environment of that time including aspects of life in the Byzantine Empire during the Anastasian – Justinian periods (at the end of 5th century to the beginning of the 6th.) It includes animation/visualization of the Anastasian Wall and interviews with historians, archaeologists and geographers who are experts in this era and the importance of the Wall. The documentary should be interesting to those interested in ancient history/archeology and tourists who are seeking non-traditional destinations. Its expected completion date is expected in 2011, with festival showings of portions of the documentary expected in Fall 2010 and Spring 2011.
The future of the wall .. drawing visitors like Hadrian's Wall?

**Future of the Anastasian Wall: Protected.. but Neglected**

The Anastasian Wall is protected by Turkish Law, but this does not prevent treasure hunters digging up sites to find valuables. This is found at numerous locations that are easily accessible. The residents of the area have apparently informed the proper authorities, but it is impossible to prosecute these individuals due the remoteness of some of the areas. Some sites appear to have been extensively excavated for treasure.

Nature continues to take its toll as it has for over a thousand years. Vegetation covers the remaining portions of the above ground wall further destroying this monument. This consists of tree, ivy and other plants. There have been some areas near the Black Sea, which have been uncovered, but there has been no restorative action taken. To the author’s knowledge, there are no plans to restore or further protect this monument. This is not surprising when there are numerous other monuments in Turkey also worthy of protection which far exceeds the money available from the Republic of Turkey.

This archaeological site has tremendous potential, becoming an asset to the Istanbul area and to the global community on multiple levels (McAdams et al. 2009):

1. It could provide a rediscovery of a portion of Istanbul’s history which has been ignored by the global community.

2. Be a touristic site similar to Hadrian’s Wall and the Great Wall of China, which could provide additional jobs and opportunities for the residents of greater Istanbul.

3. Create a green belt around Istanbul including the preservation of agriculture and traditional village life.

4. Open up a large recreational area for the residents of Istanbul.
(5) Be a part of a development plan for greater Istanbul that would encourage the preservation of open space, historic sites and the environment while still accommodating the industrial, residential and commercial needs of the city.

(6) Serve as an example for redevelopment for other areas of Istanbul.

Regardless of the importance of this irreplaceable ancient monument, the outlook for this area is not promising, given the rate and the structure of development in the last twenty years, without a strategic planning environment focusing on the proper protection and development of the Anastasian Wall area. Many historical sites have been damaged or compromised in areas of Istanbul due inadequate protection measures. If we fatalistically resign ourselves to a dystopia, this is what will be allocated to this area and another piece of history will fall victim to uncontrolled development. If we strive for something better (somewhere between dystopia and utopia), this is realistic, but still not an easy road. It is my hope that citizens and governments (nationally and internationally) will have the vision to pursue an alternative that may lead to better protection of the Anastasian Wall and other historical monuments in the Istanbul metropolitan area, so to allow many future generations to enjoy and be enlightened by them.

References:


Istanbul and her Sister European Capitals of Culture Conference, Istanbul.


Photographs of the wall: http://www.shc.ed.ac.uk/projects/longwalls/AnastasianWall.htm