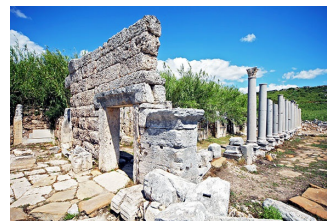


Why Perga?

By Mark R. Fairchild

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“Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos [in Cyprus] and came to Perga in Pamphylia [in southern Anatolia] ... They passed on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia [in central Anatolia].”



(*Acts 13:13–14*)

Why Perga? Paul and Barnabas returned to Perga (Greek, *Perge*) where Paul preached (“spoke the word”) and then “went down to Attalia and from there they sailed to [Syrian] Antioch” (*Acts 14:26*).

These are the only references to Perga in the Acts of the Apostles—or elsewhere in the New Testament, for that matter.

To cover the 200 miles from Cyprus to Perga on his first missionary journey, Paul would have boarded a commercial vessel. Passenger ships for the general public did not exist in the first century. Shipping was almost exclusively for commercial or military purposes. Consequently, travelers made arrangements with merchants to board cargo vessels.¹

Perga was 7 miles inland up the Kestros River (now the Turkish Aksu River). Cargo that was transported over large distances on the open sea was generally loaded onto large ships with deep drafts. These ships docked at coastal ports that could accommodate such ships. A large cargo ship could not have gone up the Kestros River to Perga.

The closest seaports to Perga were Magydos and Attalia, from which, as noted in the second quotation from Acts above, Paul and Barnabas sailed when they left Anatolia and went to Syrian Antioch (*Acts 14:26*). Whether they landed at Magydos or Attalia on their journey from Cyprus or at one of the other major Anatolian seaports closer to Cyprus—Side, Korakesion or Anamurium—is unclear.

If they landed at one of these seaports, they either walked the coastal road to Side, whereupon the road led inland directly to Perga, or they took a smaller ship from one of these ports to the mouth of the Kestros River. Paul and Barnabas then either took a small boat up the Kestros to Perga or simply walked the 7 miles.²



The route north from Perga to Pisidian Antioch was itself difficult and dangerous—regardless of which of the alternate routes scholars argue about that Paul and

Barnabas took. True, there were some excellent Roman roads at this time, but they were designed for commercial and military wagons and carts and connected only major centers relevant to these activities. Networks of less durable gravel and earth roads, as well as footpaths, connected smaller towns and villages. These roads and paths often traversed rough terrain and were frequented by robbers and thieves who could operate more freely on these paths than on the policed paved roads.



Many of these routes followed rivers that flowed south through precipitous mountains and canyons before emptying into the Mediterranean Sea.

So why Perga?

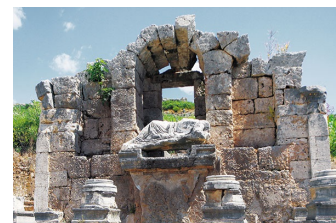
Most probably because of its Jewish population. Paul stopped to preach in Perga on his return journey from Pisidian Antioch (*Acts 14:26*). No doubt there was a synagogue in the city. Paul probably also wanted to visit other Jewish communities along the Kestros River valley. These Jewish communities would provide Paul and Barnabas with food and hospitality.

Excavations have been carried out in Perga since 1946—first by Arif Müfid Mansel of Istanbul University and, beginning in 1985, by Haluk Abbasoglu, also of Istanbul University. About 25 percent of the ancient city has been unearthed.

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But no synagogue or other evidence of a Jewish population has been found. Among the more impressive structures are a theater, a stadium, a long colonnaded street (the *Cardo Maximus*), a restored agora, a gymnasium (*palaestra*), Roman baths, a decorative fountain (*nymphaeum*), Hellenistic towers, Byzantine churches and much more. In addition, more than 200 spectacular sculptures were recovered. (Most of them are now housed at the award-winning Antalya Archaeological Museum.)

Oddly enough, archaeological evidence for Jews at Perga comes not from Perga, but from Aphrodisias, 160 miles northwest of Perga. Like Perga, Aphrodisias was a major marble center that produced a galaxy of extraordinary sculptures and buildings. Among the finds at Aphrodisias was a 9-foot-high rectangular marble pillar that probably came from an Aphrodisias synagogue. On two sides it is inscribed with at least 125 names—68 identified as Jews, 3 as proselytes and 54 as Godfearers (*theosebeis* [θεοσεβής]), non-Jewish sympathizers who contributed to (and attended) the synagogue but who had not formally converted.^a (That would have required circumcision.) Inscribed in the margin of Face II with the list of Jews is the name “Samuel, Elder from Perga” (ΣΑΜΟΥΗΛ ΠΡΕΣΒΕΥΤΗΣ ΠΕΡΓΕΟΥΣ). It is not certain what the



term Πρεσβευτής (Elder) conveys. It probably refers to some official or officeholder. It could simply mean an old man, but it more likely refers to an office. The most likely possibility, however, is that Samuel 056 057 came to Aphrodisias as an official from Perga. He seems to be a Jewish envoy or representative of Perga to Aphrodisias.



If this is the case, it would indicate a rather large Jewish population at Perga. It is significant that Samuel is listed on Face II, with the Jews, but the fact that his name was placed in the margin suggests that Samuel was not a member of the Aphrodisias community who migrated from Perga but rather was a visitor to the city. That Samuel was inscribed on this pillar at all suggests that he was acting in an official capacity as a representative from Perga for the dedication of the structure. All this indicates there was a significant Jewish population in Perga.

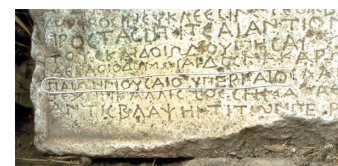


The date of the Aphrodisias inscription is uncertain, but in any case it is several centuries after Paul visited Perga. The scholars who published the Aphrodisias inscription date it somewhat hesitantly to the early third century A.D.³ More recently, it has been dated to Late Antiquity (the fourth or even fifth century). But the likelihood is that the Jewish community of Perga was already there when Paul visited the city.



An inscription found at Sarilar (ancient Choma) 058 50 miles west of Perga in Lycia also provides evidence of Jews at Perga. The inscription, dating to the Hellenistic or early Roman period, mentions one Paeon, the son of “Musaeus of Perga,” who was “supreme in the stone cutter’s art” and who created reliefs. The inscription also mentions a person named Manossas.⁴ Musaeus and Manossas (Moses and Manasseh) are Hellenized Jewish names. The reference to the family’s origin in Perga and Paeon’s involvement with sculpture may indicate that some Jewish artisans migrated the short distance from Perga to Choma.

Jews probably also migrated to other sites farther north up the Kestros River. Most of these towns and villages have never been excavated and very little is known about them from the few surface surveys that have been conducted. A number of chance finds, however, indicate a Jewish presence to the north.



The route from Perga to Pisidian Antioch was an arduous journey over some of the most difficult terrain of the Taurus Mountains. This route would have taken Paul and Barnabas up the Kestros River valley past Pednelissos east of the river. An inscription found at Pednelissos from the time of Trajan (emperor from 98–117 A.D.) refers to Salmon (Σαλμων), the dedicator of an honorific inscription.⁵ Salmon (Solomon) is a Jewish name, and the

inscription may suggest a Jewish presence at Pednelissos in this early period. Unfortunately, 059 Pednelissos has never been excavated.

Also on the way from Perga to Antioch is the site of Sia (or Osia). A doorpost found there has a relief carving of a box (perhaps representing a building) containing an individual carrying a staff. Above the relief is another object that is weather-beaten and indistinct. A close look at it, however, indicates it is a menorah. If so, the relief may represent a person in a synagogue. In any event, it is evidence of a Jewish presence.



At Milyas (Melli) northeast of Sia, an inscription was recovered from a well next to a building that may have been a synagogue or a church. The scholar who studied this inscription, Stephen Mitchell, cautiously associates the inscription with a cult site that indulged the monotheism that was increasingly emerging in this area, and the presence of this cult seems to testify to the existence of Jewish or Christian congregations in the area.⁶



Evidence of a Jewish community is suggested even farther north at Sagalassos in the direction of Pisidian Antioch. Recent excavations there led by Marc Waelkens of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven have revealed a city high in the Taurus mountain range richly decorated with temples, fountains, two agoras, a theater, an odeon, a stadium, basilicas, baths and domestic buildings. In a large residential complex, referred to by the excavators as the mansion, a lamp was found dating to the second or third century A.D. with a menorah on the upper side. This may be scant evidence, yet it nonetheless indicates that there was a Jewish presence in Sagalassos during the early Roman period.

Acts indicates that Paul deliberately traveled to cities with Jewish populations. The priority of these Jewish communities was underscored in Luke's recollection of Paul's speech at Antioch: "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you [the Jews] first" (*Acts 13:46*).⁷ After preaching in Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas traveled southeast to other Jewish communities at Iconium, Lystra and Derbe before retracing their steps back to Perga.

From there it was a short distance to the port at Attalia from which they sailed to the metropolis of Syrian Antioch.

The Jewish community at Perga was probably the reason for Paul's journey there. As shown by the excavations, Perga was a major city and may well have been Paul's base for forays to inland Jewish communities before leaving for other places with Jews *en route* to Pisidian Antioch.

Footnotes:

- a. Angelos Chaniotis, "Godfearers in the City of Love," **BAR** 36:03.

Endnotes:

1. Lionel Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995) and L. Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 149–162.
2. Although today the Kestros/Aksu River is not navigable, both Strabo and the *Stadiasmus Maris Magni* indicate it was in ancient times.
3. J. Reynolds and R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1987).
4. G.E. Bean and R.M. Harrison, “Choma in Lycia,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 57 (1967), p. 43.
5. *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, Vol. II, 718. The mountaintop site near Kozan currently exhibits large city walls and two city gates, an agora, a three-story market building (*macellum*), a necropolis and several unidentified buildings. The remote location of Pednelissos makes it unlikely to be excavated anytime soon. Thus, it is difficult to say much about the composition of the city and the possible presence of Jews there.
6. Stephen Mitchell, “Inscriptions from Melli (Kocaaliler) in Pisidia,” *Anatolian Studies* 53 (2003), pp. 139–159. Mitchell suggests that the ruins should be dated to the third century A.D.
7. Paul’s journeys in Acts follow this pattern. Luke’s narrative notes that Paul almost always speaks at synagogues in the cities along his route. Paul’s letter to the Romans (1:16) also supports this plan. See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008).



Mark R. Fairchild

PROSPEROUS PERGA. During his two visits to the city, Paul would have walked along the city’s main street, the *Cardo Maximus*. A freshwater channel ran through the center of the thousand-foot-long colonnaded promenade that was lined with covered walkways and shops in structures such as the one shown here. Over six decades of excavations at Perna have exposed extensive remains from the Roman city, which continued to prosper for centuries

after Paul and Barnabas's visit. But no synagogue has been found, despite evidence of a Jewish population there.



PAUL'S ROUTE THROUGH ANATOLIA. If Paul and Barnabas arrived at the ports closest to Cyprus, their path to Perga would have been a significant detour from the easiest routes to the Anatolian interior.



Paul and Barnabas may have traveled northwest over the paved but roundabout Via Sebaste (indicated in red). Or Paul and Barnabas more likely traveled up the Kestros River valley (indicated in green), visiting the various Jewish populations en route.



Mark R. Fairchild

FOLLOW THE WATER-LINED ROAD. A now-headless statue of the river god Kestros reclines at the nymphaeum, or fountain, at the end of Perge's main street, the Cardo Maximus, at the base of the city's acropolis. A small waterfall under the statue would have fed the freshwater channel running through the center of the Cardo. The citizens of Perge memorialized the Kestros (modern Aksu) River and its eponymous deity for provisioning the region's fertile lands and ease of transportation.



Mark R. Fairchild, Antalya Museum

A CITY OF MARBLE. Perge's magnificent sculptural legacy provides modern visitors with a glimpse of the resplendent ancient city. Hundreds of well-preserved statues from Perge line the Antalya Museum's halls with gods and emperors. This third-century A.D. statue depicts

the ill-fated satyr Marsyas. In Greco-Roman mythology, Marsyas was punished for challenging the deity Apollo. Despite the harsh punishment dealt to the satyr, representations of Marsyas came to symbolize free speech in the Roman world. This statue's severe facial features and distinctively wrinkled forehead are typical of the iconic Pergaeon style.



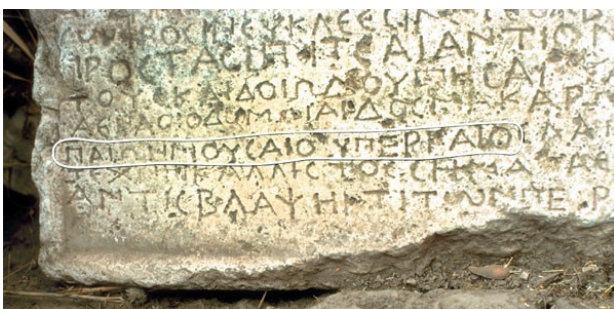
Angelos Chaniotis

Squeezed into the margins of a 9-foot-tall pillar that may have served as the Aphrodisias synagogue's doorjamb are the words "Samuel, Elder from Perga" (ΣΑΜΟΥΗΛ ΠΡΕΣΒΕΥΤΗΣ ΠΕΡΓΕΟΥΣ). The inclusion of a representative from Perga alongside more than 120 synagogue donors reflects the importance of Perga's Jewish community to their peers to the northwest.



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Machteld J. Mellink Collection of Archaeological Site Photography, Bryn Mawr College

STONE-CUT INSCRIPTION FOR A STONECUTTER. *This inscription, known as the Osses Monument, mentions an expert sculptor named Paeon, the son of "Musaeus of Perga" (highlighted left: ΠΑΙΟΝ ΜΟΥΣΑΙΟΥ ΠΕΡΓΑΙΟΣ) at ancient Choma, 50 miles west of Perga. The name indicates a Jewish presence among Perga's artisan community, which may have supplied skilled workers for neighboring communities.*



Mark R. Fairchild

RUGGED ROMAN ROAD. Paul and Barnabas would have traveled on secondary roads like this on their way to Pisidian Antioch.



Mark R. Fairchild

WELCOME SIGN FOR WEARY TRAVELERS. A doorpost relief carving from Sia, 25 miles northwest of Perga, depicts a person with a staff under a worn image of a menorah. Paul and his companions would have relied on supplies and hospitality from local communities of Jewish kinsmen in Anatolia to aid them along the 120-mile journey from Perga to Pisidian Antioch.

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