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For ICAZ 2018
12 April 2017

Ankara

A Brief History

Overview

Ankara is a modern city with a remarkably long history. It has been a capital city four times: as the capital of the Galatian tribes, as the capital of the Roman province of Galatia, as the temporary summer-time capital of the Roman Empire after the emperor Arcadius, and as the modern capital of the Republic. Throughout this history, the city consisted primarily of the Ulus neighborhood and the defensible castle hill. Ankara's position as the hub of several Roman highways made it an important military and trading center throughout antiquity. At its historical height, Ankara was one of the largest cities in the Roman empire by size, stretching into the Sıhhiye neighborhood to the south. It quite possibly had a population of 100,000, which is impressive by the standards of the day. Rome itself had a population of 1 million at its height.

Hittites

There was a Hittite presence in Ankara, but it is unclear whether they used the castle. It is possible that Ankara is the city which is referred to as *Ankuva* in Hittite literature. Archaeological evidence for this period is sparse, but one can find bronze-age materials in Ankara. Keep your eyes peeled for the little Hittite lion on display at the Roman Bath Complex.

Phrygians

Ankara was clearly important for the Phrygians, who begin inhabiting the city in the 8th century BC. According to them, Ankara was founded by the legendary King Midas. There were at least twenty *tumuli*, large mound burials, in the city. Only the richest people could afford such burials, so there must have been some very influential individuals living in Ankara. The Phrygians were known for their expertise in textiles, and Ankara's location in central Anatolia was a perfect place to take advantage of a booming wool industry. Materials from this period include pottery found during the excavation of the Hacı Bayram – "Temple of Augustus" complex, and a number of sculpted plaques including those of lions, griffins, and the goddess Kybele.

Galatian Capital

After Alexander pushed the Persians out of Anatolia, a Galatian tribe called the *Tectosages* moved into Ankara from southern France, via the Balkans. They made Ankara the capital of the region, which included two other major cities, Pessinous and Tavium. The Galatians often worked as mercenaries, which explains one of the myths surrounding the name of the city. One story says that the Galatians helped a Hellenistic Pontic king win a naval battle in the Black Sea, and they brought anchors back to Ankara as trophies (Ancyra means “anchor”). This is why you may see the occasional anchor lying about the city, even though Ankara is land-locked.

Roman Period

The city of Ankara expanded significantly when it was brought into the Roman Empire by Augustus in 25 BC. Within the first century the city boasted large colonnaded streets, markets, a theater, the “Temple of Augustus and Roma,” monumental fountains, and a stadium. The *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, “Acts of Augustus” is carved on the wall of the Temple of Augustus, and is considered one of the most important Roman inscriptions in the world. The inscription can still be seen today on the southern wall of the temple.

The 3rd century AD was a difficult time in Ankara. The historical sources are sketchy, but Goths most likely attacked the city, destroying the stadium among other buildings. Then Zenobia of Palmyra probably controlled the city before it was retaken by the Roman emperor Aurelian. At some point during all the chaos, new fortification walls were built around the city. Because Ankara was an important military center, several emperors are known to have visited. Among them was the emperor Julian. There is a monumental column which can still be seen today, just west of the Hacı Bayram complex. It is traditionally believed to have been dedicated to the emperor Julian in the 4th century AD, but the capital of the column is of a later 6th-century style.

Late Antiquity

During the next few centuries, the city became largely Christianized, and was an important center for the early Christian church. There were a number of saints in Ankara, including St. Basil and St. Clement. The remains of the church of St. Clement can still be seen, although with some effort, in the neighborhood just to the north-west of the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations. In the 7th century, the city was raided by Persians and Arabs. When we visit the castle today, much of the fortifications that we see were built during this period of instability. An interesting aspect of the castle walls is that they are filled with recycled building materials from much older Roman buildings. If you look carefully, you can find a number of Roman inscriptions, architraves, and even stadium seats reused in the castle walls.

The Ottoman City

During the Ottoman period, the city retained its importance as a local hub for trade. They traded mohair, a very fine cashmere-like wool from the Angora goat, which is primarily white, but does come in different colors. The Angora cat also appears in this period, which is known for its long white fur, and sometimes having different-colored eyes. Around the city, building continued even though the population was dwindling down to around 40,000 people. There are 12th and 13th-century mosques which can still be visited, including the Alaaddin mosque inside the castle and the Arslanhane mosque just outside the main castle gate. The Anatolian Civilizations museum itself is housed inside a 15th-century bazaar featuring ten domes. The castle was also further fortified, and a new city wall was built in the 17th century.

The Modern Capital

The city of Ankara became the capital of the Republic in 1923, after it served as the headquarters for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk during the War of Independence. Over the next few years, the city expanded rapidly in population. The most striking buildings from the early Republic can be seen along Atatürk Boulevard in the Ulus and Sıhhiye neighborhoods. These include the Ziraat Bankası building from 1929, the War of Independence Museum, and the Republic Museum, which housed the Turkish parliament from 1924 to 1960. Another very important landmark is Anıtkabir, the Mausoleum of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. It was completed in 1953, and has a uniquely eclectic architectural style.

Sites

Roman Bath Complex

The Roman Bath Complex is probably one of the best sites in Ankara, because in addition to the remains of the baths, the hill also acts as an open-air park, where gravestones, milestones, and other inscriptions are on display alongside hundreds of architectural fragments. The bath complex itself is commonly dated to the period of Caracalla in the early 3rd century by coins found during excavation, but it is very likely from the 2nd century AD. It is believed to have been dedicated to the god of health and medicine, Aesclepius. The large open space near the entrance to the baths was originally a *palaestra*, a square where people could engage in athletic activities among other things. This is also a good place to pick up a Museum Card if you don't already have one.

Haci Bayram Complex – Temple of Augustus

The Haci Bayram mosque dates from the year 1429, but it has undergone a number of renovations over the years. It is built right up against the “Temple of Augustus and Roma.” The temple was built during the reign of the emperor Augustus, and may have been placed on the site of an earlier temple to Kybele and Men, which would explain why the temple faces the southwest instead of the east like a typical Roman temple would. Originally the room that we see standing would have been painted yellow and surrounded by columns. Its outer *peristyle* of columns was removed during the middle ages to be reused somewhere else, and the building was used as a church and then a madrasa.

Ankara Castle

An original date for the castle is difficult to ascertain. We do know that it existed before the Romans came to Ankara, because Strabo discussed the castle (*phrourion*). There were some brief excavations in 1939, and Roman foundations were found in several areas around the castle hill. The castle as we see it today however, is from a later date. This date usually ranges from somewhere in the 7th century AD to about 859 AD, though the castle has had many additions and renovations since then. The neighborhood inside the castle is generally charming, with restaurants and small shops, and it is a very short distance from the Anatolian Civilizations Museum.

Museum of Anatolian Civilizations

The Museum of Anatolian Civilizations is just to the southwest of the main entrance to the castle. It is housed in a renovated 15th-century bazaar, and features collections from Çatalhöyük, Hittite and Assyrian settlements, Phrygian tombs, and the Roman and Ottoman eras. The central space is reserved for a great number of larger stoneworks, mostly from Hittite and Assyrian sites, including cult statues, winged griffins, and long sculptural programs. The section containing the Roman-era materials is downstairs and features an impressive coin collection, among some other more famous pieces, like the large Trajanic portrait found in a nearby neighborhood. Don't forget to explore the garden outside, which has a number of Roman milestones, sculptures, and architectural fragments. The gift shop is in the garden on the south side of the museum.