



Worshipping the Mother Goddess: An Underground Cult Complex in Late Antique Aphrodisias

VORTRAG

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Excavations in a suburban neighborhood of Aphrodisias have revealed a remarkably well-preserved underground cult complex dedicated to the Anatolian mother goddess Kybele. Concealed within the basement level of a large late antique private mansion—strategically positioned between the residence’s public quarters and an east–west street—the complex consists of a spacious central cult chamber, several smaller subsidiary rooms, a long subterranean corridor, and a lightwell that, in its final phase, was sealed and adapted for communal dining. To date, the sanctuary has been traced over an area of 26 by 15 meters, though it almost certainly extended further.

Originally established in the imperial period, the complex underwent several renovations in Late Antiquity, including a near-total rebuilding in the later 5th century. The sanctuary in this form remained active into the early 7th century, until the mansion that housed it was abruptly destroyed by fire in 617. Excavations have yielded a rich assemblage of cult equipment, including four statuettes of Kybele, effigies of other deities, three enigmatic “mountain busts,” amulets, numerous ceramic incense burners, ceramic and copper-alloy lamps, and copper-alloy tableware.

This paper examines the architectural setting of the complex, structural features, cultic imagery, associated material culture, and the broader social and religious conditions at Aphrodisias that allowed pagan worship to endure into the 7th century.

