Antalya is full of tourists, but Byzantine (and Seljuk) Attaleia goes unnoticed by those busy in the streets below, selling and sweating. Antalya’s thirteenth-century fortifications in one street are in the process of being tidied up to provide an appropriately atmospheric backdrop for overpriced drinks and mediocre bands, in a new tourist bar. From a square above the modern equestrian statue of the Seljuk sultan who captured Attaleia from the Byzantines and Franks gazes towards the sea which had made the city one of the most important urban centres in the Mediterranean. Today the harbour is full of mock Pirates of the Caribbean ships, a sight which in one image captures the beauty and banality that travelled around south-western Turkey with me for two weeks.

From Antalya I struck north through the Taurus mountains to the sites of Laodikeia, Hierapolis, Tripolis and Chonai (birthplace of Niketas and Michael Choniates), the relationship between which is puzzling and as yet largely unexamined. The exact location of thirteenth-century Laodikeia is still uncertain, although the classical/early Byzantine city is both well-known and abundant in snakes. The substantial fortifications at Hierapolis (Fig. I) and Tripolis (Fig. II), which archaeologists have dated to the thirteenth century, leave almost no trace in contemporary texts, despite seeming to have been far more substantial than anything at Chonai (regularly mentioned by historians). These problems oozed out of the landscape as I careered between sites, which it turned out had looked deceptively close together in Tabula Imperii Byzantini in the library. An understanding of the sheer scale of the areas controlled by men who have been dismissed as rebels and petty local lords by historians is immediately apparent on the bus from Denizli to Alaşehir (Byzantine Philadelphia). The size of the Byzantine city walls are matched only by the kindness of the staff at the appropriately named Philadelphia Hotel, who offered to drive round all the Byzantine monuments of the labyrinthine modern city.

Arriving in the massive conurbation of İzmir on the anniversary of Gezi Park, meant that a massive display of police force stifled the bustle of the city. Nevertheless İzmir proved a
solid base for visiting Smyrna, Magnesia, Nymphaion and Sardis, although the citadel of the latter, shrouded in an unsettlingly fierce thunderstorm proved inaccessible. The palace of Nymphaion proved to be covered in appropriately Byzantinesque wooden scaffolding. However, the Kastron strikingly positioned in the hills above the modern town of Kemalpaşa was perhaps the highlight of the trip, despite the chain-smoking urchins who tried to steal everything (really, everything). The nationalists have done their best to ruin the Kastron of Magnesia (Manisa) by erecting a luminous billboard of Turkey on what should be a protected site, but even this was unable to completely ruin the atmosphere of the site.

From İzmir I turned south to Selçuk (Ephesus), where the classical remains underwhelmed after the striking remoteness of Nymphaion. A truly frantic day took me to Sampson (Priene), a stunning classical city framed beautifully by the woods which have consumed it beneath a Byzantine acropolis (Fig. III), then the fortified theatre of Miletus and finally to the massive temple of Didima. Despite a lack of willing lifts and consequently a lot of walking, I travelled like a Byzantine pilgrim, to the holy mountain of Latros. The massive mountain sanctuary looms above the inviting waters of Bafa Gölü, although I was informed by two conservationists from Istanbul who were testing the water that it is slowly being poisoned. The mountain and lake are home to a vast array of Byzantine monasteries and fortifications, some of which I was able to visit and to which I feel compelled to return (Fig. IV).

After heading back north I turned east to follow the Maeander valley, stopping first at Aydın (Tralles), where the archaeological ‘park’ faced a large military complex, clearly taking advantage of the hill, as strategically important now as it was when the Palaiologoi decided to rebuild the city. While attempting to reach Kalesi Mastura, above Nazilli, I was summoned to the smoky and strangely soviet office of a man who I think was the mayor of Mastura, where I was threatened with the gendarmerie if I attempted to visit the archaeological site. Needless to say I went and had a look anyway, albeit fairly briefly, before hurriedly reboarding the dolmuş to Nazilli, from where I set out for Aphrodisias, via the stunning Kastron of Antioch-on-the-Maeander (Fig. V). Sitting on a tower at the confluence of two river valleys it was easy to imagine the duel between Theodore Laskaris and Kay-Khusraw in the lush fields below. It is unfortunate then that this duel is almost certainly nothing more than a literary topos. The atmosphere at Aphrodisias was both metaphorically and literally electric as I managed to arrive in time for yet another thunderstorm.
Having been invited when visiting the fortifications of Tripolis to a wedding, I made a slight detour going to Isparta via the tiny village of Yenicekent. There my newest friend, the talented pide maker from the village took me first to a music festival in an adjacent village. A sudden thunderstorm turned the streets into a river, flooding the street stalls, one of which it turned out belonged to my friend. After saving the strange array of women’s clothing for sale we returned to Yenicekent laden with munitions and beer, both of which were used at the wedding party where celebratory shots were fired into the thunderous rain by an army of grinning villagers sheltering beneath the boots of their cars from the torrential downpour, which anointed the young couple as they and the rest of the village danced in the streets beneath leaking tarpaulins.

The following day I was eventually able to escape the hospitality of my friends and reach Eğirdir, via Isparta. This understated town sits on or around a spit of land jutting into a glassy lake, which also, according to a very enthusiastic Austrian, has the added benefit of being the home to a vast array of rare butterflies. The spit had been fortified by a Byzantine and later Seljuk wall which in parts survives to demonstrate the tactical advantages of the site. Having saved what turned out to be the best till last I finished the trip by visiting the Byzantino-Seljuk border city of Sozopolis (Fig. VI). Kay-Khusraw’s old stronghold did not disappoint, poised as it is more precipitously than Tintagel above (what I think is) an Ottoman bridge and a collection of Seljuk mosques. The Imam of one having explained that it was founded by Kay-Kaus proceeded to find a dedicatory plaque in a mixture of French and cobwebs. Sozopolis was the final stop before traversing the Taurus again and returning to Antalya.

From the library in Birmingham, it is easy to detach the landscape from the history of thirteenth-century Byzantium. This trip has enabled me to introduce new and important levels to my study of a time which it is impossible not to find compelling. I would like to thank the College of Arts and Law Graduate School, which through the Postgraduate Research Support Fund enabled me to make this trip and thus add more concretely the topographical dimension to my research.
Fig. I Hierapolis. Photo: M. Kinloch 2014.

Fig. II Tripolis. Photo: M. Kinloch 2014.
Fig. III Sampson/Priene. Photo: M. Kinloch 2014.

Fig. IV Bafa Gölü from Mount Latros. Photo: M. Kinloch 2014.
Fig. V Antioch-on-the-Maeander. Photo: M. Kinloch 2014.

Fig. VI Sozopolis. Photo: M. Kinloch 2014.