UNEARTHING ANCIENT COLOSSAE:

A PROJECT TO BRING TOGETHER TWO NATIONS, THEIR PEOPLE, SCHOLARS AND STUDENTS.

The earliest historical documents show that the city of ancient Colossae, not far from Denizli and close to Honaz, was well known in the 6th century BCE. It was known into the 8th century CE, though its significance gradually waned. While archaeological investigation of two other ancient sites, Laodicea and Hierapolis, has grown in recent decades, Colossae has remained untouched.

When Dr Michael Trainor from South Australia’s Flinders University first visited the site about fifteen years ago he wondered about the possibility of working with others to learn more about Colossae, its archaeology, the region and the people of Honaz and Denizli. He knew that this would be a challenging project. Geographical distance, differences in cultural and religious backgrounds, the fact that Colossae did not have any obvious monumental remains, and working through the protocols of the Turkish government added to the challenge. But it was a challenge worth engaging. In years to come, this ancient site would attract many visitors to the area. Christians remember that a letter was written to the people of Colossae in the late first century CE. Many of them were already visiting the seven churches of Asia Minor, and had added Hierapolis and Colossae to their list. But the site also holds great significance for those who are interested in ancient history, whether of the Persians,
Greeks, Romans or Byzantines. And of course the site has always figured in some way to those who live nearby. Michael recognised that the effort to interpret the site archaeologically would be of advantage to many people, including the people of Denizli and Honaz, students of Christianity and archaeological colleagues.

Michael was inspired by two things.

First the words of Ataturk at Anzac Cove were inspirational for the project.

On a monument set at the entrance to the cove where Turkish and Australian soldiers fought each other, these words from Atuturk’s 1934 address appear:

Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives; You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours. You, the mothers, who sent their sons from far away countries, wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Republic of Turkey.
Ataturk’s vision was for friendship and international unity. Though war had come between Turkey and Australia, friendship in the aftermath of war could create unity. Ataturk knew that those Australian who died and were buried at Gallipoli were also part of the Turkish people and were at peace.

Ataturk’s vision for friendship and unity lies at the heart of the Colossae project.

The second source of inspiration came from Turks and Australians that Michael spoke to, at first tentatively, and then with more confidence. Mr Ismail Iyilikçi of Denizli was key in recognising the potential of the project and saw the areas that required addressing, in terms of meeting with Turkish civic and university leaders.
As Michael discussed the possibilities with colleagues back home at Flinders University enthusiasm for the project grew. Associate Professor Claire Smith from the department of archaeology travelled with Michael to Turkey the following year to meet with Bay (Mr) Ismail Iyilikçi and begin talking about a joint archaeological project between Flinders University and Pamukkale University. Not long after, Dr Alan Cadwallader joined the Australian research team and began working on ancient numismatic and inscriptional references to Colossae. All three have continued to visit Turkey each year, meet colleagues in Istanbul, Denizli and Honaz and forge links of friendship with Turkish archaeologists, especially Doç. Dr. Nese Atik and Doç. Dr Halük Çetinkaya of Minar Sinan University and Yrd. Doç. Dr. Bilal Söğüt of Pamukkale University. This has occurred with the friendship and direction of Mr Ismail Iyilikçi, and over the past several years with the encouragement of those who have been governors of Denizli and mayors of Honaz.

The Australians hope to secure permission from the Turkish Ministry of Culture to work alongside and under the supervision of Turkish colleagues to survey the site and then to move towards its more formal archaeological interpretation. The hope is that Australian and Turkish scholars, students and people would form closer bonds of friendship through the project. These bonds have been steadily deepening in many ways. Besides the hospitality that has always been shown by Turkish people to the Australian team, Bay Ismail Iyilikçi and his wife, Hafize were guests of the Australian team in 2004. They visited South Australia, Flinders University, and met the governor of South Australia and the mayor of its provincial capital, Adelaide.

Recently Michael and Alan were invited by Pamukkale University to offer a paper on their
work at the International Symposium on Denizli and its neighbouring area held 6th-8th September 2006. This symposium also offered the opportunity to talk about the Colossae project and link with other Turkish scholars who could be partners.

Inspired by this symposium, the Australian team has also been working on similar symposiums in Australia. These will focus on Colossae, archaeological method and the relationship which archaeology has with the interpretation of ancient texts. More information will be found on the Australian website as details for symposia. (See http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/theology/institute/colossae/index.php)

The project to interpret ancient Colossae has been developing now for several years. Eventually the sharing of cultural, national, academic and archaeological interests will make this project a means to deepen the bonds of friendship between two great nations.