



Coppersmith at
Kayseri, Turkey.
Producing quality
copper products
is a tradition in
the area that goes
back centuries.

COREL PHOTO

Bithynia and Pontus

By G. Al Wright, Jr.

TO BE COMMITTED, truly committed, to the gospel of Jesus Christ is to be concerned about people—those near and those far away. That concern has to be both for persons who are not followers of Christ and for those who are. Tragically, many today who are Christ followers are hurting and facing opposition and even persecution. What is true today was true in the first century when Peter wrote his first letter to the scattered saints finding their way in places like Pontus and Bithynia. The regions of Pontus and Bithynia were located on the shore of the Black Sea in what is now north-central Turkey.

Early History

People from Thrace moved east and settled into Bithynia in the sixth century B.C. King Croesus of Lydia came through and conquered the territory

in 560 B.C. Cyrus the Great defeated Croesus and made Bithynia part of the Persian Empire. Although it operated mainly as an independent region, Bithynia remained part of the Persian

Right: Epitaph of a sailor from Bithynia reads: "To the gods of the underworld. For Titus Laelius Crispus, a sailor with the imperial fleet at Misenum assigned to the trireme Freedom. A Bithynian by birth, he lived 40 years and served 15. His heir, Lucius Sossius Dionysius, assigned to the trireme Capricorn (dedicated this stone) for him who well deserved it."



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/ KELSEY MUSEUM/ ANN ARBOR (387/30A)



The northern end of the Bosphorus Strait, which in the first century, separated Thrace (in modern Europe) from Bithynia and Pontus (in modern Asia). Still today, the strait separates Europe from Asia and joins the Marmara and Black Seas.



ILLUSTRATOR MAP/ LINDEN ARTISTS/ LONDON
**TERRITORIAL BOUNDARIES
 IN THE FIRST CENTURY**
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Empire until Alexander and his forces partially conquered Bithynia in 334 B.C. Bithynia gained full independence after Alexander's death. For over two centuries (297–74 B.C.), the Nicomedian dynasty ruled Bithynia until the Romans took control of the region.

Pontus, in its earliest history, existed as a village-based territory. Trading posts developed, especially along the coast. As population in these places increased, local but large temples became centers for administration and governance. By about 337 B.C., a unified kingdom of Pontus was emerging, as

a noble named Mithridates, who may have been a descendant of Persia's King Darius the Great, began to rule the region. Six kings named Mithridates ruled Pontus. Trying to maintain control of his kingdom, Mithridates VI twice warred with Rome. In 74 B.C., Rome moved to take Bithynia, leading to a third conflict (called the Third Mithridatic War), which lasted until 63 B.C., when victorious Rome took control of Pontus and consolidated it and Bithynia into one province. Once united, Bithynia-Pontus consisted of a strip of land about 70 miles wide that ran alongside the Black Sea.

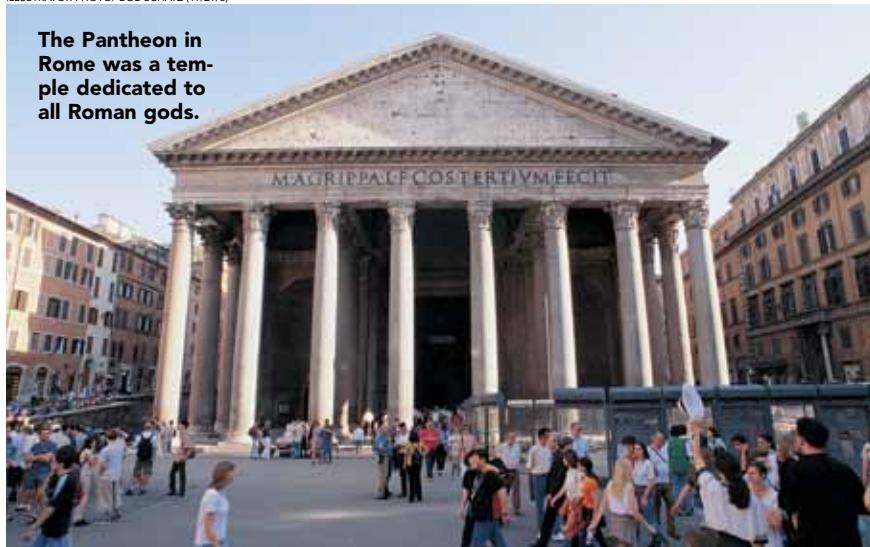
Resources

The region was significant both geographically and economically, thriving in almost every way during the time of the Roman Empire. Bithynia-Pontus was peppered with mountains and bountiful valleys. Mines in the area, some of the most important in the ancient world, produced iron, copper, and silver. Wool from this region was among the finest in the world and was much in demand in the neighboring regions. Forests in this region produced a kind of timber that was ideal for shipbuilding and furniture making.¹

Cities

Bithynia not only had more resources, it was more heavily populated and had a greater number of significant cities too. Bithynia's King Nicomedes (ruled ca. 279–260 B.C.) established the city of Nicomedia as his capital and made sure it maintained strong Hellenistic traditions and culture. Another nearby port city, Heraclea, was also steeped in Hellenistic traditions. Two other Bithynian cities, Nicaea and Chalcedon, would play a significant role in the life of the church in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (19/29/6)



The Pantheon in Rome was a temple dedicated to all Roman gods.



A lake at Sansun, Turkey—a city that was at the easternmost edge of Pontus, adjacent to Cappadocia.

Below: The Cyrus cylinder from Babylon dates to the 6th cent. B.C. The cuneiform script includes a decree by Cyrus that all prisoners were to be allowed to return to their homelands. His decree allowed the Jews (and other peoples) who had been taken into Babylonian captivity to return home.

Lower left: A cylindrical bronze vessel-stand with flaring ends decorated with incised tongue-pattern. The stand was made in an Ionian workshop and has been interpreted as a dedication by Croesus, the king of Lydia; dated to the 2nd half of the 6th cent. B.C.

ISTOCK PHOTO

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/11/54)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ DELPHI ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (35/283)

In its early history, Pontus had few cities; the region was mostly rural and unsettled. Late in the fourth century B.C., however, Amasya became the capital city and remained so until about 25 B.C.

The region was covered with dense forests. Sinope and Amisus, both port cities, were trade centers for wool merchants, who brought in their products and exported them to other places. Cities in Pontus also formed a hub for the shipbuilding enterprise and the furniture-making trades. The growing cities became increasingly the concern of the Roman emperors.

Christianity

Four times the New Testament mentions the regions of Bithynia and Pontus. Persons from Pontus were at Pentecost (Acts 2:9); the Spirit kept Paul from going to Bithynia on his second missionary journey (16:7); Aquila was from Pontus (18:2); and Simon Peter addressed his first epistle to believers who had scattered, some into Bithynia and Pontus (1 Pet. 1:1). Thus,

RESOLVING DOCTRINAL ISSUES



ISTOCK PHOTO

The Council of Nicaea met in A.D. 325 to address a theological controversy. Some were claiming that Jesus was not one with the Father and that He did not exist from eternity past, thus making Jesus a created being distinct from the Father. The Council of Nicaea adopted the Nicene Creed, which defines Jesus as of one essence with the Father (*homoousion*). The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) also met to address heresies related to Jesus' nature. One taught that Jesus was neither human nor divine but a peculiar mixture of both. The Chalcedonian Creed affirmed Jesus was miraculously both fully God and fully man.

Istanbul Gate of Iznik. This structure was built during the reign of Rome's Emperor Vespasianus in the 3rd cent. A.D. The name Iznik is a derivation of the city's ancient Greek name, Nicaea. In the early days of the church, both the first and the seventh church councils were held at Nicaea.

although the Scriptures are silent about when Christianity came to the region, Simon Peter knew of believers living there when he wrote his first epistle, about A.D. 62-64.

History indicates the number of Christians in the region had grown significantly by the beginning of the second century. Emperor Trajan in A.D. 111 sent Pliny from Rome to the province of Bithynia-Pontus. The emperor had heard reports of financial mismanagement. The cities should have been prospering; some, though, were sending news to Rome of financial problems. Pliny was to investigate and to report to Trajan the truth about

the financial condition in the cities. While in Bithynia, Pliny also investigated rumors about Christians and their worship. Some Christians were being treated at best with suspicion and most likely were suffering persecution (a situation Peter addressed: 1 Pet. 3:14-17; 4:15-19). Some accused the believers of not giving the proper worship to Rome's gods. Offerings were down at the shrines of the pagan gods, and some saw it being partly because of the Christians not participating. In his letter to Trajan, Pliny described how the Christians were worshiping their God and asked for clarification about how to treat those accused of being Christians.



Left: Coin from Bithynia dated A.D. 128-137; reverse depicts a temple façade.

Pliny's letter indicates his concern about the spread of Christianity:

For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it.²

This letter gives an early extra-biblical glimpse into how rapidly Christianity was spreading in the Roman world.

In the centuries to come, Nicaea and Chalcedon, two cities in Bithynia-Pontus, played a significant role in shaping crucial church doctrines. Statements of clarification about the trinity and Jesus' essential nature were formed and formalized in these two places. These statements are part of many church creeds that are still in use today.

Peter wrote, wanting to make sure believers faithfully lived out their commitment to Christ. Those in Bithynia and Pontus proved to be formidable in their faith. Countless lives have been changed through the influences of those first believers who lived in Bithynia-Pontus and who sought to live as salt and light. **B**

1. Helmut Koester, *History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 46; Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), 8.

2. Pliny the Younger, *Letters 10.96-97*, *Early Christian Writings* [online; accessed 3 February 2012]. Available from the Internet: www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/pliny.html.

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