



Ephesus

A Historical Survey





Left: The grand theater at Ephesus was built in the 3rd cent. B.C. Through the years it was modified until it reached its final form during the reign of the emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-117). The theater had seating capacity for 24,000.

Right: Remains of a statue of the Athenian King Androclus, the mythical founder of Ephesus, depicted as a hunter; from 2nd cent. A.D. About 1044 B.C., Androclus conquered the Asians and established Ephesus as 1 of 12 cities in the Ionian Confederacy.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS/EPHESUS MUSEUM/EPHESUS (208/17)



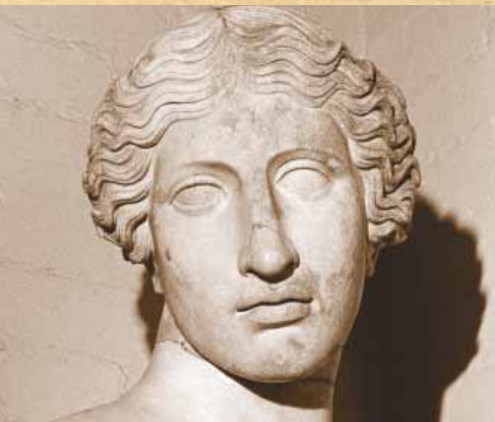
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BOB SCHWARTZ (1/135/16)



Left: Silver drachma dated 500-480 B.C.; obverse; bee with volutes on either side of its head. Probably because of their great number, the priestesses of Artemis at

Ephesus were called *Melissai* or "Bees." Thus coins stuck in Ephesus commonly depicted bees.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRENT BRUCE/UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY (32/42/89)



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Left: Star shaped plaques. Worshipers purchased these and then dedicated them to the goddess Artemis in her sanctuary at Ephesus; dated to about 650-600 B.C.

Above: Head from a statue of an

Amazon probably from 2nd cent. B.C. Legends concerning the establishment of the city claim the Amazons allegedly built Ephesus because of its proximity to the birthplace of the mother goddess of earth.

By Randall L. Adkisson

IN NEW TESTAMENT times, the city of Ephesus teemed with people engaged in the arts, sports, and trade, with theaters, stadiums, and a main street full of shops beckoning citizens and tourists alike. A port city, Ephesus attracted people of different nationalities, languages, and cultures. Secured and cultivated as an entrance into Asia by the Greeks, and after them the Romans, Ephesus thrived as a city of commerce and culture.

Locating Ephesus in Time and Place

In contrast to its earlier history, Ephesus and the surrounding region presently contribute little

in importance or interest to the world. Located along the western coast of modern Turkey, the ancient city's ruins lie directly across the Aegean Sea from Athens, Greece. At approximately 194 miles, the distance between the two cities is similar to the distance between Nashville and Knoxville, Tennessee, or between New York and Washington, DC.

Of course ancient travel was far more difficult than today. A distance easily reached today in a few hours was a journey of weeks in ancient times. The journey from Ephesus to Athens or Jerusalem in Paul's day included difficult, even

LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: Ephesians 1:15-3:21



Left: Relief of the mask of tragedy at grand theatre, Ephesus.

Below: South Street at Ephesus. Giving evidence of how heavy traffic was in the city's earlier history, chariot ruts in the pavement stones are still visible.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS (5/4/16)



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dangerous, land and sea passage. On his second missionary trip, Paul made these journeys, traveling from Athens to Corinth in Greece and then traversing the Aegean Sea to Ephesus and sailing from Ephesus across the Mediterranean Sea to Jerusalem in A.D. 52.¹

On his third journey, Paul again visited Ephesus and remained two years. According to Acts 19, he found a ready audience among 12 men who had followed the teachings of John the Baptist. After their conversion, Paul entered the local synagogue preaching and teaching for three months. According to Josephus, the substantial Jewish population associated with Ephesus

enjoyed liberal privileges based upon their religious distinctions. Ephesian Jews were exempt from the armed services and yet were free to gather supplies for sacrifices and were allowed to congregate freely for religious assemblies and Sabbath observances.² When opposition arose against the gospel in the Jewish community, the church relocated with its disciples to the school of Tyrannus and enjoyed many months of successful proclamation (vv. 8-10).

Located at the mouth of the Cayster River, Ephesus served as an important access route for trade into and out of the interior of Asia Minor and its profitable

land routes. Biblical theologian and archaeologist Merrill Unger called Ephesus "the most easily accessible city in Asia."³ Both the location and imperial favor the city enjoyed through several different eras propelled Ephesus as a cultural and commercial wonder of the ancient world. Estimates place the population during Paul's time at 250,000 residents.⁴

The history of Ephesus is long and storied. Evidently established as a free Greek colony for the purpose of opening trade routes into the interior, the city dates at least to the mid-11th century B.C. Ephesus was 1 of 12 cities comprising the Ionian Confederacy. The port at Ephesus gave merchants access to the coastal road running north through Smyrna to Troas, as well as an interior route to Colossae, Hieropolis, Laodicea, and further to the Phygian regions. As nearby ports succumbed to erosion and political intrigue, Ephesus flourished in importance and prestige.

One ancient myth records that Amazons, a culture of mighty female warriors, were the earliest builders of the town, establishing a temple where the "mother goddess of the earth was reputedly born."⁵ Ephesus's connection to pagan goddess worship prospered under each successive occupation. The Greeks established a strong cult to Artemis. The Romans accepted the association between the city and goddess worship, equating Artemis with their goddess Diana.

From its position as a free city-state, Ephesus fell into subservience, first to King Croesus of Lydia in 560 B.C. and then to the Persians. By defeating the Persians, Alexander the Great brought the city back into Greek hands and into his empire in 334 B.C. At his death, the city's ownership passed to Lysimachus, one of Alexander's generals.

Lysimachus lost the region when defeated by Seleucus I in 281 B.C. Ninety-one years later the

WHATEVER BECAME OF EPHEBUS?

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By Randall L. Adkisson

Archaeological study of Ephesus dates back to the second half of the 19th century. On December 31, 1869, J. T. Wood discovered the remains of the great temple. Other archaeologists throughout the first half of the 20th century systematically uncovered much of the landscape and ruins of ancient Ephesus.¹ Situated near the mouth of the Cayster River, Ephesus seems to have greatly suffered from land erosion, which gradually clogged its harbor and limited its trade. The ruins of the ancient city are now about six miles inland. Still Ephesus thrived until destroyed by the Goths in A.D. 262.

Nearby the ancient site today sits the Turkish village of Ayasoluk, whose name is a form of the Greek phrase *Hagios Theologos*, “the holy theologian.” This village, along with the ruins of the Basilica of St. John in the neighboring city of Seljuk, testifies to the association of Ephesus and the apostle John, who was reportedly buried beneath the ruins of the basilica.

Visitors to the site of ancient Ephesus will find many of the structures uncovered by years of archaeological work and clearly identifiable. A modern museum dedicated to the city and located in Seljuk displays artifacts, including ancient replicas of the goddess.

Above: Ruins from the Basilica of St. John at Ephesus. The apostle John, according to an early tradition, supposedly died at Ephesus and was buried on

this hill. A chapel stood over the grave during the Roman period. In A.D. 400, a larger church was built, as evidenced by the many Corinthian

capitals and the mosaics under the Synteron. Most of these remains are from Justinian, who erected an even larger basilica in the 6th century.

Few remains exist from the temple of Artemis, though fragments of the structure’s columns are in the British Museum. Pilfered stones and pillars from the site were used in both the construction of the Basilica of St. John in Ephesus and the Basilica of St. Sophia in Constantinople (Istanbul).²

The church at Ephesus grew and became a central mission point to the region. John included a letter to Ephesus in the Revelation and is reported to have resided there as pastor during the latter part of his life. Ephesus became and remained an important center of the ancient church as indicated by its hosting a significant church meeting, the Third Ecumenical Council, in A.D. 431. **B**

1. See Merrill F. Unger, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), 252-53.

2. G. L. Borchert, “Ephesus” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), 117.

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Seleucid Empire fell to the Romans when Antiochus the Great was defeated at the Battle of Magnesia. In appreciation to King Eumenes II of Pergamum for his assistance against the Seleucids, Ephesus

and the surrounding region were ceded to the Pergamum Empire. The city prospered and was peacefully bequeathed to the Romans by Pergamum’s last king, Attalus III, in 133 B.C.

From this period through the New Testament era, Ephesus functioned as a strong and vibrant part of the Roman Empire. As a proconsular seat and the capital of the Roman province of Asia, the

city enjoyed influence and standing in the region and beyond. The temple complex was a center of commerce and tourism. The city also served as an ancient banking institution. Because of the city's strength, Ephesus maintained imperial interest, garnering money and building projects, until Goths sacked the city in A.D. 262. (See sidebar, p. 41.)

A City Positioned for Prominence

A city of great prominence, ancient Ephesus reflected its wealth and culture in its buildings and landscape. If as suggested, Ephesus's population reached a quarter million inhabitants, the city was comparable in size to modern-day Lexington, Kentucky, Daytona Beach, Florida, or Greensboro, North Carolina. Yet such comparisons of population alone may not adequately express the relative size of the city. A traveler entering the first-century city was walking on the streets of the fourth largest city in the world.⁶ Therefore a better perspective might be a comparison to New York, London, or Moscow.

As a central feature of the city, the temple of Artemis was listed as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and stood four times larger than the Athenian Parthenon. More than a third larger than an American football field at 420 feet long and 240 feet wide, the temple was as tall as a 6-story building, its roof being supported by over 100 large columns. The beauty of the temple is well imagined, having been built with massive blocks of white, blue, yellow, and red marble.⁷

The impressive temple reflected and compelled an expansive industry of tourism associated with worship of the goddess. Travelers from across the ancient world swelled the ranks of the inhabitants in Ephesus during April for a festival involving a great procession to the temple, as well as various

athletic and musical competitions. Surrounding such an event were many commercial endeavors designed to support worship and tourism. From prostitution to souvenirs, worshipers honoring the goddess associated with fertility and plenty filled the coffers of artisans, businessmen, and citizens in this port city. The threat to the tourist trade of goddess images caused the riot recorded in Acts 19, as silversmiths and other craftsmen trading in images of Artemis envisioned the decline in their business that would result from the acceptance of Paul's gospel.

The large population and influx of tourists allowed Ephesus to maintain a huge theater, the ruins of which may still be visited today. Seating approximately 24,000, the theater was circular shaped in a form reminiscent of a modern stadium with 66 tiers of seating. The stage alone measured 115-by-70 feet.⁸ From the entrance to the theater, the Arcadian Way, a broad marble paved thoroughfare flanked by ornate columns, buildings, and shops stretched through the city to the port. According to Acts 19:29, the riotous crowd moved along this street into the great theater dragging Paul's traveling companions to face mob judgment.

Less than one half mile north of the theater was the Ephesian stadium. A place designed for athletic events and possibly gladiatorial battles, this stadium might have been where Paul faced wild beasts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:32. Some scholars suggest that Paul was using "wild beasts" as a metaphor for the mob scene at the theater. Either way, this area of the city is imprinted with Christian history.

Archaeological efforts at Ephesus suggest a city that once swarmed with people and commerce. From the impressive and imposing main thoroughfare—flanked by ancient baths, a smaller theater, government buildings, a music hall, and

a multistory library—stretched smaller streets leading to the city's vast area of residences and warehouses. The ruins highlight the ancient city's character. A thriving port city, Ephesus was adorned with both the advantages and vices of its position and commerce.

Ephesus successfully combined the cultures and histories of many different people and periods. The city's original population assumed the flavor of Greek culture and religion. With Roman conquest, the city continued to thrive, synchronizing the various religions and welcoming immigrants from across the region. Records reveal subcultures of Egyptian, Jewish, Greek, and Roman citizenry.

Diverse in its culture, endowed by its location, rich in its commerce, and favored by its rulers, Ephesus enjoyed a long period of influence and wealth in the ancient world. For more than a millennium, Ephesus played a key role in the history of Asia Minor. Its influence in early Christianity may easily be seen in the New Testament records. Paul's visits, as recorded in Acts, his Epistle bearing the city's name, along with the city being mentioned in the Corinthian and Pastoral Epistles, and the record of the Ephesian church in Revelation bear evidence of its importance for the believer. **B**

1. Compare F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 255.

2. *The Antiquities of the Jews in The Works of Josephus*, trans William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 14.10.12 and 25 (pp. 280 and 382).

3. Merrill F. Unger, *Archaeology and the New Testament, A Companion Volume to Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, 1962), 249.

4. Mitchell G. Reddish, "Ephesus" in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 425.

5. Unger, 249.

6. Reddish, 425.

7. Unger, 253.

8. Gerald L. Borchert, "Ephesus" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromily, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 116.

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The silt-filled delta where the sea used to come to the port at Ephesus.

