

Sardis and Philadelphia

Sardis was the capitol of the region of Lydia, 45 miles to the east of Smyrna. It was one of the great cities of the ancient Greeks and one of the most prominent in its time. It was the capital of a powerful region, a prize worth possessing. Gold was found to come from there, and the mythology around King Midas with the golden touch seems to have originated from Sardis.¹ The remains of a large gold smelting operation have been excavated within the area of the ancient city. King Cyrus of Persia captured this city and battles waged between Greece and Persia for control of the region. It remained a part of the Persian Empire until Alexander the Great defeated the Persians. The history of Sardis is a history of battles and wars. William Ramsay described it “more like a robber’s stronghold than an abode of civilized men; and in a peaceful and civilized age its position was found inconvenient.”² By the Roman period it was already living in the past, relying on its ancient prestige and not moving forward and thriving in the peace of the Roman Empire.

Its acropolis held temples to Artemis and Cybele. Artemis was the fertility goddess of Asia Minor. The temple to Artemis in Sardis was second only to the Ancient wonder of the world in Ephesus. Cybele appears to be an amalgam of the Greek Persephone, the beautiful maiden daughter of Demeter (the Greek mother goddess), who was taken captive by Pluto, the god of the underworld. The cult religion in Sardis seems focused on restoring life to the dead. The fertility rites directed to the worship of the goddess Artemis and a dark eternal-life, or life reborn through death concept centered on Cybele resulted in a licentious temple cult.³ It was a city with a reputation for softness, luxury, apathy, and immorality, pervading not only the pagan circles but the Christian church as well.

Sardis is also home to one of the largest Jewish synagogues to be discovered outside of Israel. It is one of the finest examples of Jewish synagogues to have been found. Not much is known about the Jewish community in Sardis during the Roman era. It can only be

¹ Evans, Donald F.; *The Seven Churches of the Apocalypse*, 2009.

² Ramsay, William; *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*;

³ Yamaguchi, Edwin M.; *New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor*, 1980.

surmised according to the elegant remains of the synagogue ruins, that it thrived. The synagogue was destroyed by the Persians in 616 AD.

In 17 AD a massive earthquake destroyed the city and covered the great temple of Artemis in landslides. By the time John recorded the Revelation and the letter to the church in Sardis, the city had already long been in decline. In times of peace it had lost its allure. The Pactolus stream had long since stopped giving up its gold. It was a city already lost to time; and lost in remembrance of victorious times past.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia's history is briefer than many of the other cities we've studied due to a weak presence in historical texts. Located 25 miles south east of Sardis on the Imperial-Post Road, it came into existence in 189 B.C. as an outpost in the Pergamum Kingdom under King Eumenes II of Pergamum. It was aptly named the "City of Brotherly Love". Eumenes named the city after his brother Attalus II for the love, respect and loyalty his brother had shown him. Attalus II was the younger brother of King Eumenes I. When his brother became king, Attalus served him faithfully as his general. Attalus achieved much power and influential friends among the Roman Empire. The Romans attempt to persuade Attalus to overthrow his brother in order to gain control over the Pergamum Kingdom. Attalus refused and stood with his brother against the Romans. For his loyalty and devotion King Eumenes II sent Attalus to found the city of Philadelphia. Attalus succeeded his brother as king upon Eumenes' death. The city was built not as a military outpost, but an outpost of Asiatic-Greco culture, spreading the Greek language and culture into the regions of Lydia and Phrygia. Its purpose was to further Hellenize eastern regions.⁴

Little remains of Philadelphia have been uncovered. It is believed that many of the ruins lie beneath the existing city of Alashihir. The columns of the Byzantine Church dedicated to St. Jean (John) stand on the site of part of the ancient city. Philadelphia was also renowned for its grand Temple of Zeus, the remains of which have not been found. Excavations around the site of the Church of St. Jean have revealed marble foundations that date back to the Roman era. Possibly the Byzantine church was built over the foundations of the Temple of Zeus, a common practice modeling the belief that the Christian faith was more powerful than the pagan gods. Nothing in the excavations proves conclusively this

⁴ Ramsay, William; Ramsay, William; *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*

foundation to be part of the Temple of Zeus.⁵ Due to the frequency of earthquakes, and the existing modern city, very little is known about ancient Philadelphia. Coins reflect the existence of temples to Artemis, Dionysus, Zeus and Aphrodite, among other lesser gods.⁶

Just as much of Sardis had been destroyed in the earthquake of 17 AD, so has Philadelphia. Emperor Tiberius saw to the reconstruction of Philadelphia and made it into a Roman center of trade. This region was frequently unsettled by earthquakes which caused many of its inhabitants to move to the countryside outside of the city center, away from the towering and toppling Roman structures. It was recorded by historian R.C. Trench that “no other city of Asia Minor suffered more, or so much from violent and often occurring earthquakes.”⁷ Perhaps the terrestrial upheavals felt in this city parallel the spiritual persecutions of the region. Christians from Philadelphia were martyred alongside Polycarp⁸, Bishop of Smyrna in 155 AD[†].

⁵ Evans, Donald F.; *The Seven Churches of the Apocalypse*, 2009.

⁶ Yamaguchi, Edwin M.; *New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor*, 1980.

⁷ Trench, R.C.; *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia*, 1897, Reprinted 1978.

⁸ Yamaguchi, Edwin M.; *New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor*, 1980.

[†] Polycarp had been a disciple of John the Apostle, and suffered martyrdom at the hands of Roman authorities and Jewish leaders in Smyrna.