

THE CITIES IN WESTERN ASIA MINOR AND GREECE

Two important historical markers help provide us with dating anchors for the general chronology of Paul's travels. One was the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius Caesar (Ac. 18:1-2). Though the precise date of this expulsion is debated, the event is known to us from ancient writers and puts



Claudius Caesar
Held office AD 41-54

Paul in Corinth not long after AD 49, probably in AD 50, and he remained there for a year and a half (Ac. 18:11).¹ The other dating marker is more precise, since it concerns Paul's appearance before the *bema* of the Proconsul Gallio (Ac. 18:12-16), the brother of the famous Seneca. According to an inscription at Delphi, he seems to have taken office in July AD 51.

Though Paul visited many cities in the ancient world during his mission tours, he spent over a third of his time in only two of them, Corinth and Ephesus. At Corinth, he initially spent 18 months (Ac. 18:11), and he visited the city afterward as well. He came to Ephesus on his 3rd tour, after stopping there briefly on his 2nd tour (Ac. 18:19-21), and here he stayed over two years (Ac. 19:8, 10). The total time for Paul's three mission tours was probably not more than ten years, from about AD 47 or 48 to about AD 57.

In Macedonia

Before reaching the Grecian peninsula, Paul first ministered in the Province of Macedonia. Philippi



The Via Ignatia, parts of which still exist, stretched across Macedonia and Thrace. This well-preserved section near Philippi is typical, providing the Romans with relatively speedy communication between the outposts of the empire.

and Thessalonica lay on the *Via Egnatia*—the Roman road built in about 130 BC that connected Apollonia (on the Aegean coast) to Kypsela (on the Adriatic coast). The archaeological excavation of Philippi began in 1914 with the French, though more recent work has been done by the Greeks. The *Via Egnatia* bisected the city. Ancient Roman milestones indicate that the road's total distance from coast to coast was 535 Roman miles (493 English miles). The population of Philippi largely consisted of

¹ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 25.4.

NT ARCHAEOLOGY

Romans and Greeks. The Jewish community appears to have been small, and given that Jewish women were meeting for prayer outside the city near the river, presumably there was no synagogue. (Ten men were required for a formal synagogue.) Remains of the city both before and after the time of Paul still exist. The ancient Krenides Gate near a stream of water may well be the site of the women's prayer group. Also dating to the Roman Period is a crypt with traditions as old as the 5th century that it is the place Paul and Silas were imprisoned. As in most Greco-Roman cities, there is abundant evidence of pagan worship, including devotion to the cult of Hercules.



Philippi, to which Paul would later write the Philippiian Letter, was a Roman colony and major administrative center. Here Paul and Silas were flogged and imprisoned as disturbers of the Pax Romana.



1st century Roman market at Thessalonica

Thessalonica, unlike Philippi, Amphipolis and Apollonia, had a synagogue (Ac. 17:1), and excavation in the city has provided an important inscription verifying Luke's use of the term πολιταρχης (= polytarch, civil magistrate, cf. Ac. 17:6). This inscription from the Vardar Gate lists six politarchs, and it, along with several other inscriptions using the same term, verify the institution long before the time of Paul.

At Athens, Paul encountered the most well-known city of ancient Greece—and one of the most excavated! The city was dominated by the Acropolis with its classical temple, the Parthenon, accessible by the marble stairway constructed by Claudius in AD 42. Excavators have uncovered temples to Augustus, Zeus, Athena and Ares, among others, in addition to the Greek agora and the Roman forum. Originally, the agora was kept clear for the democratic assemblies for which Athens is famous. As a conquered city, however, the agora soon became filled with buildings and



The Areopagus in Athens, the prominent rock out-cropping to the northwest of the Acropolis, is where Paul spoke to the intellectuals of the city.

of Dionysus, and Mars Hill (lit., “the hill of Ares”), which was the meeting place of the Areopagus, the Athenian council of 500 who dominated the government of Athens. Here, Paul was mocked as a *σπερμαλογος* (= “seed-picker”) and jeered for his radical claim of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead (Ac 17:18, 32).

In Corinth

From Athens, Paul went to nearby Corinth. His lengthy stay marked a shift in his missionary strategy. For the most part, his stays in various cities had been not more than a few months at most, and sometimes considerably shorter. Here, however, Paul stayed a year and a half, and the fact that Corinth was such a strategic commercial center with a burgeoning flow of traffic from virtually all the provinces meant that he had access to a wide range of people from various parts of the world.

Settlers on the isthmus between the Saronic Gulf and the Gulf of Corinth go back to the 6th millennium BC., and by the 5th century BC, the city’s population had exploded to about 70,000. As the guardian of the land bridge between Attica and the Peloponnesus, Corinth controlled the two harbors on either side. Its strategic location guaranteed economic success.

In the 2nd century, Corinth suffered an overwhelming

monuments. The eastern market, another agora, was used for commercial purposes, and by the time Paul arrived was filled with various altars, statues and temples, a fact that troubled Paul greatly (Ac. 17:16, 22-23). The Roman satirist, Juvenal, remarked that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens! Several ancient writers have remarked about altars to “unknown gods,” and one spoke about an altar to “the god whom it may concern.” The eastern market of Athens had become a religious museum.

Other excavated features of 1st century Athens included the Odeion (music hall), the theater

QUOTING GREEK POETS

One of the striking things about Paul’s speech at the Areopagus was his use of Greek poetic lines to connect with his audience (Ac. 17:28). From Epimenides’ “Hymn to Zeus,” Paul quoted a line from the fourth quatrain that rebukes the Cretans for building a tomb for Zeus. Paul quotes the last half of the line: “But you [Zeus] are not dead: for in you we live and move and have our being.” He also quotes from Aratus’ poem “Natural Phenomena,” where the poet extols Zeus by saying, “Let us begin with Zeus...for we are also his offspring.”

NT ARCHAEOLOGY

defeat at the hands of the Roman army, and the city was burned. For about a century it languished until 44 BC, when it was elevated to the status of a Roman colony by Julius Caesar. Colonial settlers from other parts of the empire began to arrive, giving Corinth an international flavor. Since it was a



The Lechaion Road in Corinth, this is the view that would have greeted Paul when he entered the city. The road was about 40' wide and included sidewalks and drainage channels.

colony, Rome began to pump in financial resources, and major construction continued right on into the 1st century AD, especially under the emperors Tiberius (AD 14-37) and Claudius (AD 41-54). The new Corinth was laid out in the grid typical of Roman city planning, though some structures from ancient Corinth were repaired on their old foundations but modernized in conformity to Roman ideals.

The new Corinth was prosperous with an

economic base in farming (vineyards, orchards, grains), manufacture and export (pottery, bronze), and commerce (transportation of shipped goods across the isthmus). In 27 BC, Corinth was designated the capital of the new Roman Province of Achaia. By AD 44, Claudius had named Achaia a senatorial province, meaning it was governed by a proconsul chosen by the Roman Senate for annual tenures beginning each July 1st.

Near Corinth at Isthmia was one of the permanent sites for the biennial Isthmian Games for athletes and artists. Paul's year and half stay in Corinth meant that he was there in AD 51, when the games were held. References in his Corinthians letters to athletic and artistic elements, such as, boxing, racing, victory wreaths, and athletic discipline as well as musical instruments, huckstering, and the babble of foreign languages may well have been drawn from his knowledge of the biennial festival (cf. 1 Co. 2:17; 9:24-27; 14:7-11).

THE ISTHMIAN GAMES

Held in honor of the sea god Poseidon, the Isthmian Games were held every second and fourth year of each Olympiad on the Isthmus of Corinth. The games were famous for heavy eating, drinking, and sexual promiscuity (not to mention that the athletic contests were performed naked). Traveling brothels were brought in for the entertainment of guests. Invitations to private dinners after the games were opportunities for sexual advances by courtesans, which in Corinth was "permissible" for young men so long as they were 18 years old, citizens, and had been awarded the toga virilis (symbol of adulthood and sexual maturity). Sexual promiscuity was virtually a rite of passage under the general principle that the body had been endowed with appetites, and these appetites should be satisfied.