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INTRODUCTION TO COLOSSIANS

I. CITIES OF THE LYCUS VALLEY

Colossae, the home of the church to which Paul's letter to the Colossians was addressed, was a city in the Lycus valley of Western Anatolia (Asia Minor). Two neighboring cities, also in the Lycus valley, are mentioned in the letter—Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 2:1; 4:13, 15-16).

The river Lycus¹ (modern Çürük-su) is a tributary of the Maeander (modern Büyük Menderes). In antiquity the territory through which the Lycus ran was the southwestern part of the kingdom of Phrygia. Phrygia became the dominant power in Anatolia with the decline of the Hittite Empire after 1200 B.C., but was weakened by the Cimmerian invasion about 700 B.C., and had to yield to the hegemony of Lydia. When Cyrus the Great conquered Croesus, the Lydian king, in 547 B.C. and captured his capital, Sardis, Phrygia was incorporated into the Persian Empire and remained so until the conquest of Alexander the Great in 334 B.C. and the following years. In the division of Alexander's empire after his death southwestern Phrygia fell ultimately to the Seleucid monarchy.

A new, expansionist power, the kingdom of Pergamum, arose to the north of this territory after 283 B.C., when Philetaerus, governor of Pergamum under Lysimachus (ruler for a time of Macedonia and part of Anatolia), made a unilateral declaration of independence. His successors from 241 B.C. onward assumed the title of king. Between 277 and 230 B.C. Northern Phrygia was taken over by the Galatians, immigrant Celts from Europe, who were first invited into Anatolia as mercenary soldiers by the king of Bithynia.

¹To be distinguished from the Lycus in Lydia (modern Kum Çayı), a tributary of the Hermus (modern Gediz Nehri), and from that in Pontus, Northern Anatolia (modern Kelkit Çayı).

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

When Antiochus III succeeded to the Seleucid throne in 221 B.C., he had to win back large areas of his kingdom in Anatolia which had been annexed by the king of Pergamum. In this he was aided by his mother's brother Achaeus, an able military commander. But when Achaeus recovered those areas, he proclaimed himself independent ruler over them and had himself crowned king at Laodicea in 220 B.C. Antiochus had to enter into a temporary alliance with Pergamum in order to put down Achaeus, who was captured and killed at Sardis in 214 B.C.² For the next quarter of a century the Lycus valley remained part of the Seleucid realm.

In 192 B.C., by crossing the Aegean and intervening in the affairs of the Greek city-states, Antiochus III clashed with Rome, which had lately proclaimed itself liberator and protector of those states. So began the long-drawn-out decline of his kingdom. The Romans drove him out of Greece, pursued him into Asia, and defeated him at the battle of Magnesia in 190 B.C. Two years later they imposed on him the Peace of Apamea (a Phrygian city near the source of the Maeander), by the terms of which he had to surrender most of his Anatolian possessions, many of which (including southwestern Phrygia) were handed over to the king of Pergamum, Rome's faithful ally.³

The last king of Pergamum, Attalus III, died without heirs in 133 B.C. and bequeathed his kingdom to the Roman state. When the Romans agreed to accept the legacy, they reconstituted the kingdom of Pergamum as the province of Asia. The cities of the Lycus valley were thenceforth subject to the authority of the Roman proconsul of Asia (apart from the three years following 88 B.C. when the Romans were forced to abandon the province by Mithridates VI, king of Pontus, and the brief overrunning of Anatolia by the Parthians in 40 B.C.).

Colossae was situated on the south bank of the Lycus. The spelling *Kolassai*, found in some NT manuscripts, may represent an earlier, possibly Phrygian, pronunciation. (If so, then the spelling *Kolossai* could represent an attempt to provide the place-name with an artificial etymology.)⁴

Colossae first appears in extant history in Herodotus, who tells how Xerxes, in his westward march against mainland Greece in 480 B.C., "came to Colossae, a great city of Phrygia, situated at a spot where the river Lycus plunges into a chasm and disappears. The river, after flowing underground for about five furlongs, reappears once more and . . . empties

²Polybius, *History* 5.48.12; 8.15-21.

³Polybius, *History* 21.45.

⁴As though it were related to *κόλοσσός*, "statue."

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itself into the Maeander."⁵ This statement rests on a misunderstanding or a distorted report. Colossae stood at the beginning of a steep gorge, two and a half miles long, into which the Lycus descends rapidly from the upper to the lower valley. At some points in the upper part of the gorge the water penetrates the limestone bed and disappears, and this may account for the tale of an underground flow.

Eighty years later Cyrus the Younger, marching east from Sardis with an army of mercenaries in his bid for the Persian throne, crossed the Maeander and, after a day's march through Phrygia, arrived at Colossae, "an inhabited city, large and prosperous," where he stayed for seven days.⁶

The autonomous civic status which Colossae enjoyed under the Seleucid and Pergamene kings was retained under the Romans. It has sometimes been inferred from Strabo that, by the beginning of the Christian era, Colossae had dwindled in importance and become one of several unimportant small towns, but the inference is invalid because of a lacuna in Strabo's text at this point.⁷ There is inscriptional evidence that Colossae retained its importance into the second and third centuries A.D.⁸ The elder Pliny (died A.D. 79) includes it in a list of famous towns of Phrygia (although this list is extracted from an older source).⁹

The site of Colossae was discovered by W. J. Hamilton in 1835. He identified its ruins and acropolis south of the river and its necropolis on the north bank. Later the Byzantine Church of St. Michael the *Archistratēgos*, fated to be destroyed by Turkish raiders in 1189, was erected on the north bank. According to W. M. Ramsay, its ruins were still "plainly visible in 1881."¹⁰ It remained the religious center of the district after the population of Colossae moved to Chonai (modern Honaz), three miles to the south, at the foot of Mount Cadmus (Honaz Dağ). Since the site of Colossae remains unoccupied, it presents an inviting prospect to archaeologists.

⁵Herodotus, *History* 7.30.

⁶Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.2.6.

⁷Strabo, *Geography* 12.576. Colossae is not one of the *πολίσιμα* which Strabo passes over with a bare mention.

⁸See *MAMA VI* (Manchester, 1939), xi, 15-18; W. M. Ramsay, *Cities and Bishopricks of Phrygia*, I (Oxford, 1895), 208-34; D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor*, I (Princeton, 1950), 126-27; II (Princeton, 1950), 985-86.

⁹Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 5.145.

¹⁰*Cities and Bishopricks of Phrygia*, I, 215. Michael is called the *ἀρχιστράτηγος* ("chief captain") in the Greek versions of Dan. 8:11 (cf. for the sense, though not for the word, Dan. 10:21; 12:1) and in several Greek apocrypha (e.g., *Testament of Abraham* 1; 9).