

CHAPTER 50

THE SOCIAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL WORLD OF THYATIRA

Rev 2:18–29

Mark Wilson

KEY POINTS

- Thyatira is the third city of the seven churches of Revelation.
- The city was a Lydian fortress later refounded by the Macedonians as a military colony in the third century BC.
- Thyatira was situated at a major intersection with intraprovincial and inter-regional connections.
- Trade guilds played a major role in civic life with Lydia being a purple dealer in Philippi.
- Eating food sacrificed to idols at pagan temples was a major issue in its Christian community.

GEOGRAPHICAL SITUATION

Thyatira (modern Akhisar) was situated in the northwestern part of Lydia³⁹ amidst a broad, fertile plain along the Lycus River (modern Gördük), a northern tributary of the Hermus River (modern

Gediz) (Pliny, *Natural History* 5.115).⁴⁰ Its elevation is 338 feet (103 m) above sea level. Strabo noted a claim by some, surely mistaken, that it was the farthest most city of Mysia (*Geography* 13.4.4). Various ancient traditions declared

39. For an excellent map of the geography of ancient Lydia, see Christopher H. Roosevelt, *The Archaeology of Lydia, from Gyges to Alexander* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 39, fig 3.4.

40. See the map of the province of Asia on page XXX. The personification of a reclining river god Lycus appears frequently on the reverse of imperial-period coins.



that its name was formerly Semiramis, Pelopeia, and Euhippia. However, as Getzel Cohen notes, “it is doubtful if these names were ever actually used.”⁴¹ Its name is probably Asiatic and derived

from “teira,” the Lydian word for “fortress” or “stronghold,” hence the Greek form *Thyateira* (Θυάτειρα). Stephanos (under the entry for “Thyateira”) suggests unconvincingly that its probable founder

41. Getzel Cohen, *Hellenistic Settlements in Europe, the Islands, and Asia Minor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 238, 239–40.

Seleucus I named the city after his daughter.⁴² The acropolis, today called Hastane Hüyüğü (Hospital Mound), was first settled in the Early Bronze Age, as pottery remains show.⁴³

Located at an important road junction, Thyatira was situated between Sardis to the southeast (35 miles [56 km]) and Pergamum to the northwest (52 miles [83 km]). It lay along the imperial road improved in 129 BC by the Roman governor Manius Aquilius, which started in Pergamum, then at Laodicea merged with a branch coming from Ephesus. The order of the final five of the seven churches tracks this route, so the messenger delivering the Apocalypse would have used it (see map on page XXX). Another major road linked Smyrna to the southwest (56 miles [90 km]) and Bithynian Prusa to the northeast (150 miles [240 km]). In 281 BC the battle of Corupedium was fought to the south between the two Diadochi kings, Seleucus I and Lysimachus. After his victory Seleucus I resettled Lydian Teira with Macedonian officers and soldiers to form a military colony (Strabo, *Geography* 13.4.4; see also *OGIS* 211). This became one of the oldest Hellenistic settlements in Asia Minor.⁴⁴ Surrounding villages undoubtedly belonged to its territory (*χώρα*, *chōra*). Several later milestones dis-

covered in this *chōra* give measurements to Thyatira as the roadhead (*caput viae*). One reads “seven miles [11.25 km] from the most splendid and greatest (city of) Thyatira.”⁴⁵

HISTORICAL SITUATION

Because of its strategic location, Thyatira witnessed many other battles. During the third century BC the Galatians, Seleucids, and Attalids struggled over Thyatira. The Seleucids held the city in 190 BC since the army of Antiochus III, before the battle of Magnesia, was camped *circa Thyatiram* (Livy 37.8.7; 37.37.6; 37.38.1). With the defeat of the Seleucids, Thyatiran delegates surrendered to the Romans (Livy 37.44.4). However, the treaty of Apamea awarded its control to the Attalids in 189 BC, who ruled for over a century (Polybius 21.45.10).

Because of its vulnerability, the city was invaded by Prusias of Bithynia in 150 BC and later besieged by the pretender Aristonicus in 131 BC who resisted the bequest of the Attalid kingdom to Rome (Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.38). In 129 BC Thyatira was incorporated into the Roman province of Asia. It was located within the *conventus* of Pergamum, one of the thirteen administrative and judicial centers of the province (Pliny, *Natural History* 5.116).⁴⁶

42. Cohen, *Hellenistic Settlements*, 240.

43. Information regarding the ongoing archaeological work in Thyatira can be found on the excavation's mostly Turkish web site <http://thyateirakazisi.com/>.

44. Christian Marek, *In the Land of a Thousand Gods: A History of Asia Minor in the Ancient World*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 195.

45. David H. French, *Milestones: Asia*, fascicle 3.5 of *Roads and Milestones of Asia Minor* (Ankara: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 2014), 239 no. 130, 254 no. 137E, 256–59 no. 140; for the translation see Hasan Malay, *Researches in Lydia, Mysia and Aiolis* (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999), 60–61 no. 53.

46. Christian Habicht, “New Evidence on the Province of Asia,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 65 (1975): 70, 78, 80.



Arches from Colonnaded Street at Thyatira

During the First Mithridatic War in 84 BC the Roman general Sulla confronted his rival Fimbria who held Thyatira. Fimbria surrendered the city, and his troops were added to Sulla's army (Plutarch, *Sulla* 25.1). Fimbria received safe passage to Pergamum where he fell on his sword in the temple of Asclepius (Appian, *Mithridatic Wars* 9.60).

Around 27 BC Thyatira was among some Asian cities struck by an earthquake (Agathias, *Histories* 2.17.1, 9). Their appeal to Augustus for relief was referred to the Roman Senate, and in 24 BC the future emperor Tiberius argued its case, resulting in aid to rebuild the city (Suetonius, *Life of Tiberius* 8). During the Imperial period the citizenry (δῆμος, *dēmos*) and private donors expanded the civic space with colonnades (like the one visible in Akhisar today), an ornamental gateway, and gymnasia.

After Caracalla visited the city in AD 214, he made it an assize town to conduct judicial hearings (OGIS 517). Because of this privilege, the city honored Caracalla as Founder and Benefactor. In AD 218 his successor Elagabalus

gave permission to C. Perlius Aurelius Alexander to hold a "sacred game" (*iselaisticus*) in the city involving athletic



Bust of Emperor Caracalla

and musical competition. It was sponsored by the trade guild of fullers. On the inscription the name of the emperor

Antoneinon, aka Elagabalus, was erased. After Elagabalus' assassination in AD 222, the Roman Senate decreed the damning of his memory (*damnatio memoriae*), and his name was erased from all public monuments.⁴⁷

Thyatira was typical of cities in Asia Minor where women such as Iulia Iuliana and Iulia Menogenis held public offices. Others had sacral duties in priesthoods and high priesthoods. The responsibilities of these offices were somewhat fluid and varied among cities.⁴⁸ Thyatira has been called a "minor" town among the seven churches, but as seen, this was clearly not the case.⁴⁹

COMMERCIAL SITUATION

As in other Asian centers of textile production, trade guilds were prominent in Thyatira. These included wool dealers, potters, linen weavers, tanners, leather workers, and coppersmiths. Inscriptional evidence reveals their influence in civic affairs.⁵⁰ Prominent among these guilds were dyers mentioned in several inscriptions (TAM V.2.991.5–8). Its purple dyers were noted throughout the empire: in Thessalonica

an inscription mentions Menippus of Thyatira who was honored by the purple-dyers there (IG X.2.1.291).⁵¹ Lydia was a purple dealer (*πορφυρόπωλις*, *por-*



Bust of Emperor Elagabalus

phyropōlis) from this city whom Paul met in the Roman colony of Philippi (Acts 16:14–15, 40).⁵² Since Thyatira was

47. This inscription now stands in Akhisar's archaeological park; it (pp. 37–38 no. 29) and nineteen other new inscriptions of Thyatira (nos. 16–35 have been published by Malay, *Researches in Lydia, Mysia and Aiolis*, 33–46.

48. Sviatoslav Dmitriev, *City Government in Hellenistic and Roman Asia Minor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 180, also nn. 214–15.

49. G. W. Clarke, "The Origins and Spread of Christianity," in *The Augustan Era*, vol. 10 of *Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. Alan K. Bowman, Edward Champlin, and Andrew Lintott, 2nd. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 858.

50. David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 1:48–49.

51. Another inscription found in Philippi mentions a purple dyer from Thyatira named Antiochus son of Lycus. Regarding its authenticity, see Gennadi A. Sergienko, "Our *Politeuma* Is in Heaven!": Paul's Polemical Engagement with the "Enemies of the Cross of Christ" in *Philippians* 3:18–20 (Carlisle: Langham, 2013), 86–87 no. 4.7, esp. n. 74.

52. Teresa J. Calpino, *Women, Work and Leadership in Acts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 198 argues that *Λυδία* (*Lydia*) is better understood as "the Lydian lady," understanding it as a



Murex Shells and Purple Dyed Textiles

inland, purple dye from mollusks had to be imported. A deep scarlet dye was also obtained from the local madder root, an organic dye still used for carpet production in Turkey today. Dyers used much water, so they were usually located at the edge of the city.⁵³ Their work also produced both a strong odor and polluted wastewater. Such activity was probably localized near the Lycus River northwest of Akhisar. Here at the village of Medar/Ovaköy an inscription (*TAM V.2.991*) was discovered that praises Marcus son of Menander for paying for an aqueduct that undoubtedly benefited the dyers by providing an adequate supply of water.

RELIGIOUS SITUATION

The city's primary deities were Apollo Tyrinnus and Artemis Boreitene. In the second century BC they along with Athena were featured on Thyatira's coinage. In the Roman Imperial period other gods and goddesses appeared including Heracles, Cybele, Tyche, Nike, and even Serapis.⁵⁴ Apollo Tyrinnus had a sanctuary "outside the city" (*TAM V.2.1001*). His full name, Helius Pythius Tyrinnaeus Apollo (*TAM V.2.976*), represented a syncretistic conception of Lydian, Macedonian, and Greek deities. What Artemis' local epithet Boreitene means can only be conjectured; perhaps

toponym. However, the three other examples of women cited with the personal name "Lydia" undercut her assertion.

53. For a discussion of porphyrology, see David Graves, "What Is the Madder with Lydia's Purple? A Reexamination of the Purpurarii in Thyatira and Philippi," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 62 (2017): 4 tab. 1 for dyers in Thyatira; 10 for the issue of odors. For a list of other inscriptions mentioning purple dyers and dealers, search for "purple" on the webpage *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, <http://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations/?s=purple>.

54. For examples, see the Wildwinds.com page on "Ancient Coinage of Lydia, Thyateira," <http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/lydia/thyateira/i.html>.

it is derived from a village in the city's territory.⁵⁵

On its civic coinage the busts of emperors began to appear *seriatim* starting with Claudius in the first century AD. The reverse of a coin featuring Vespasian on the obverse has an unidentified tetrastyle temple on the reverse.⁵⁶ Neighboring Pergamum had Asia's first imperial cult temple in 29 BC. A locally organized civic cult of Rome and Augustus was dedicated sometime before 2 BC (*TAM* V.2.902–3). A coin issued circa AD 100 features the draped bust of the goddess Roma.⁵⁷ In AD 110 a second imperial temple was constructed in Pergamum to honor Trajan.

The demos of Thyatira erected a stele to honor its neighbor for being Asia's first city to be twice honored as an imperial temple guardian (*νεωκόρος, νεόκορος*; compare Acts 19:35).⁵⁸ The oracle at Didyma instructed Thyatirans how to avoid further pains and casualties inflicted by the offended Moon Goddess by prescribing offerings to certain gods and heroes. Didyma was approximately 140 miles (225 km) away, which shows how far suppli-

cants would travel to receive prophecies for themselves or their communities.⁵⁹

A Jewish community probably lived in Thyatira. Two thousand Jewish families from Mesopotamia were settled in Lydia and Phrygia by Antiochus III around 210 BC (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.148–153). So the Jewish populace would have come from these colonists.⁶⁰ An inscription (*CIJ* II.752) dating from the second century AD names Fabios Zosimus and his wife Aurelia Pontiane, who erected a sarcophagus for themselves and “placed it on a holy site, which is before the city by the *sambatheion* in the Chaldean precinct alongside the public highway.”⁶¹ The sepulcher's ambiguous language has generated much controversy regarding its meaning. Williams writes,

Some see it as the direct equivalent of the *sabbateion* mentioned in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 16.164 and conclude that a synagogue is indicated here and Fabios Zosimos was a Jew. Others connect the word with the Chaldaean Sibyl, Sambethe, and think that a pagan

55. Cohen, *Hellenistic Settlements*, 242.

56. RPC II.939. See an image of the coin at the webpage *Asia Minor Coins* (Coin ID #13053), <http://www.asiaminorcoins.com/gallery/displayimage.php?pid=13053>.

57. See the image of coin BMC 18 at Wildwinds.com (<http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/lydia/thyateira/i.html>).

58. This inscription still stands on Pergamum's acropolis next to the Trajan temple.

59. Addressed to the “Macedonians,” the inscription is probably Hellenistic with perhaps a later reinscribing during the Roman period; see Hasan Malay and Georg Petzl, *New Religious Texts from Lydia* (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2017), 31–37 no. 3.

60. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 247 n. 21, believes that Thyatira was never under Seleucid control at this time so could not have received Jews. However, by this time Attalus I had been confined to Pergamene territory and Antiochus III had reestablished control of Sardis; see John Ma, *Antiochos III and the Cities of Western Asia Minor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 246.

61. Margaret H. Williams, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans: A Diasporan Sourcebook* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 175 no. VII.47; see also Walter Ameling, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis: Band II, Kleinasien* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 297–302 no. 146.

shrine (possibly belonging to Sabbath-worshippers) is indicated here. Whatever the truth, Jewish influence is unmistakable.⁶²

Lydia, whom Paul met in Philippi (Acts 16:14), had probably become a Godfearer through this Jewish community; however, no remains of a synagogue have been found.

Christianity perhaps arrived in Thyatira in the 50s, for Luke writes that residents of Asia heard the gospel during Paul's time in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). One of the earliest Christian inscriptions yet found (early third century) came from nearby Chorianos (modern Akselendi). Aurelius Gaios openly identifies himself as a Christian along with his wife Aurelia Stratoneikiane.⁶³ It is remarkable that a century before Christianity is legalized, Christians around Thyatira are publicly declaring their faith. The prophetic "Phrygian heresy" called Montanism took over the community in the late second century and dominated for 112 years (Epiphanius, *Refutation of all Heresies* 51.32–33). According to Epiphanius the Thyatiran church was restored to ortho-

doxy around 335 (*Panarion* 33.1–5, 8–10).⁶⁴ Papyrus, a deacon from Thyatira, was martyred in Pergamum along with Carpus, bishop of Gordos, most likely during Decius' persecution in AD 250.⁶⁵

THYATIRA IN LATER HISTORY

The site's location was lost until the seventeenth century. The British consul in Smyrna, Paul Rycout, began to visit the seven churches in October 1669. His party visited Tire, then widely believed to be Thyatira. However, he discovered no such a tradition among the local Greeks nor any archaeological confirmation, so he concluded that the site should be north-east of Smyrna as the literary evidence suggested. On October 8, 1670, after a visit to Pergamum, Rycout rode into Akhisar where he saw "Pillars and broken Stones with rare Sculptures, and on certain Inscriptions, which at a distance were so fair, that they seemed almost legible." Upon seeing the city's name on inscriptions, he realized that Thyatira had been found.⁶⁶ Numerous objects of Thyatira are found in the archaeology museum at Akhisar and in the provincial archaeological museum at Manisa.⁶⁷

62. Williams, *Jews among the Greeks and Romans*, 201–2 n. 60.

63. William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 100–104. Whether the inscription is Montanist debatable; it also lacks the characteristic "Christians for Christians" formula.

64. For the issues related to Epiphanius' dating, see Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions*, 136–38.

65. This later date is contra Eusebius (*Church History* 4.15.48) who puts it in the 160s; see Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions*, 140–41.

66. Paul Rycout, *The Present State of the Greek and Armenian Churches, Anno Christi, 1678* (London: Starkey, 1679), 72, 73–74. In this volume Rycout presents a fifty-page review (pp. 30–80) of the present state of the seven churches, the first scientific publication about them. Rycout had been commissioned by Britain's Royal Society to "inquire after these excellent Works of Antiquity, of which that Country is full"; see Mark Wilson, "Smyrna: The Open Door to Rediscovering the Seven Churches," *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 89 (2007): 78.

67. For statues of Athena and Nike see Münteha Dinç, "Manisa Müzesi'ndeki Hellenistik – Roma Dönemi Heykelleri," in *Manisa Müzesi Heykeltıraşlık Eserleri*, ed. Serra Durugönül (Mersin: Mersin University, 2015), 33–34, 37.



Column Bases for Roman Colonnaded Street

SOCIAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL REALITIES OF THE THYATIRA LETTER

The Thyatiran message is the central letter of the seven and the longest. It is also the only letter to refer to the other six churches (Rev 2:23). Three allusions—Jezebel (Rev 2:20; compare 1 Kgs 16:31–21:25 *passim*), rod of iron (Rev 2:27; compare Ps 2:8–9), and morning star (Rev 2:28; compare Num 24:17)—presumed a background in the Jewish Scriptures to interpret. The command not to eat food sacrificed to idols (Rev 2:20) required compromised Christians to forgo banquets at pagan temples where such food was served. Trade guilds also gathered for festive banquets, so to withdraw from such dining occasions invited economic ostracization. The large ashlar blocks in the southeast corner of Ulu Mosque suggest that the structure was formerly a pagan temple where such banquets

occurred. The building was later converted into a church and then to a mosque.

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