



## ST. PAUL AND GODDESSES ALONG THE VIA EGNATIA: PAGANISM AND THE EARLY JESUS MOVEMENT IN ANCIENT MACEDONIA

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### **Abstract**

*The Via Egnatia, one of the major roads of the Roman Empire, was essential to the growth of the Jesus movement, which eventually became Christianity. It was along the Via Egnatia, in part, that St. Paul, his companions and other missionaries traveled to spread the “good news” about Jesus. Archaeological excavations in cities along the Via Egnatia, especially in ancient Thrace and Macedonia, have uncovered evidence that demonstrates the strength and resilience of the traditional deities for centuries after the time of Paul. Despite the patriarchal nature of the new religion – a male God, a male savior, and primarily male leadership – many of the cults that the earliest missionaries encountered would have been female, and many of the leaders in those cults would have been women. Contrary to the nature of the established church that eventually came to dominate the West, in some ways based on distortions of Paul’s views of women, the early Jesus communities would not have succeeded without women or without many goddess-oriented practices that Christianity adopted.*

*This article will examine several cities along the Via Egnatia that featured cults to female deities. We will highlight cities mentioned in Paul’s genuine letters and the Acts of the Apostles in the New (Christian) Testament and examine literary and archaeological evidence for the relationship between Jesus followers and adherents of these goddesses. We will show that conversion from paganism to the Jesus movement was often complex: pagan worshipers did not necessarily give up their old deities altogether but rather added the new God – and Mary, Jesus’ mother – to their religious repertoire. The persistence of the pagan cults until after the time of Constantine in the early fourth century, the active role of women in the early Jesus movement, and the adoption of pagan practices by Christianity are in evidence along the Via Egnatia and enable us to gain new perspectives on the early Jesus movement and one of its major figures, St. Paul.*

**Key Words:** *St. Paul, Via Egnatia, early church, Jesus movement, ancient Macedonia, Greece, Roman Empire*

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Map Showing the Via Egnatia From Wikimedia Commons 12/15/22,

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balkans\\_6th\\_century\\_marked\\_Via\\_Egnatia,\\_Via\\_Militaris,\\_Via\\_Pontica.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balkans_6th_century_marked_Via_Egnatia,_Via_Militaris,_Via_Pontica.png)

## INTRODUCTION

The Via Egnatia, which ran from Constantinople in the East to Dyrrachium, Albania, in the West, was one portion of the approximately 53,000 miles of well-built and -maintained roads of the Roman Empire, built around 130 Before the Common Era (BCE).<sup>1</sup> It was along the Via Egnatia, in part, that St. Paul, his companions and other missionaries of the early Jesus movement traveled, visiting friends and family, preaching in city marketplaces, and dispatching letters to communities that had welcomed them.

The most prominent region traversed by the Via Egnatia and visited by Paul around 50-60 of the Common Era (CE) was Macedonia. Paul mentions Macedonia in several of his genuine letters (epistles) that are contained in the New (Christian) Testament – Romans 15:26, II Corinthians 1:16, 7:5, 8:1, 9:2, 4, 11:9, and I Thessalonians 1:7, 8, 4:10 – and he relates in Rom 15:19 that he traveled all the way to the western province of Illyricum. The two most prominent cities along the Via Egnatia associated with the Jesus movement are Thessaloniki (Salonica) and Philippi, and Paul's letters to the Thessalonians and Philippians are among the earliest surviving examples of literature of that movement.<sup>2</sup> These two cities are also among the most extensively excavated in Greece and provide important archaeological information about the beginnings of what became Christianity.

<sup>1</sup> Everett Ferguson ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990) 80. See also N.G.L. Hammond, "Via Egnatia," in N.G.L. Hammond and H.H. Scullard, eds., *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 1118.

<sup>2</sup> Note that most Christian Testament scholars believe that the second letter to the Thessalonians was not written by Paul.



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In addition to Paul's genuine letters, the book of Acts of the Apostles in the Christian Testament, written around 115 CE,<sup>3</sup> mentions Paul in conjunction with four other Macedonian cities: Neapolis (Acts 16:11), Apollonia and Amphipolis (Acts 17:1), and Berea (Acts 17:10, 13 and 20:4). Each of these cities, as well as Pella and Edessa, have been professionally excavated and provide important data about their unique histories, governance, flavor and array of local deities. Even if the passages in Acts about Paul's travels are fictitious, the real Paul may well have visited these cities because they would have been along the route of his attested journeys.

Several important things become readily apparent from this evidence. First, pagan cults were alive and well not only during the early years of the empire as the movement spread but also long afterwards, demonstrating that the new Christian religion did not immediately take hold or dominate the religious landscape. Second, adherents and leaders in the pagan cults were both male and female, and evidence shows that devotees who might have been attracted to the Jesus movement did not immediately give up their traditional deities but rather added Jesus to their pantheon. Several Greek words are variously translated as "Greek," "Gentile," or "nation" (ethnos and Hellene) in English versions of the Christian Testament; unfortunately, the English translations obscure the persistence and importance of pagan deities.

Third, since mainstream or orthodox Christianity eventually became a male-dominated religion – a male God, the male Son of God, and all-male priesthood – it is essential that we examine female deities that were present in the social environment at the time of Paul and note leadership roles that women had in those cults.

Finally, traditional female deities like Artemis/Diana, Isis, Kybele, Demeter, Athena, and others ultimately merged with the figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, at many sites. This was due in part to the ancient goddesses' descent from the Neolithic (Stone Age) all-powerful nature deity and her connection with women, children, and healing. The veneration of Mary remains strong today in Greece and elsewhere, especially among women; from examining the deities along the Via Egnatia we witness the origins of this development.

Examining the Egnatian goddess cults, in conjunction with some of the earliest texts from the Jesus movement, connects several strands of inquiry that enlarge our understanding of the early Jesus movement and the growth of Christianity: the polytheistic environment in which Paul and the early missionaries worked; the staying-power of goddess worship in antiquity and the importance of the healing, growth and cyclical aspects of those goddesses' cults; the presence of women leaders in both the pagan cults and early Jesus groups; and the growing popularity of Mary among devotees within the male-dominated Christian context.

#### THE EGNATIA CITIES AND THEIR DEITIES

Cities along the Via Egnatia mentioned in conjunction with Paul have been well excavated and have yielded helpful finds that complement (and sometimes contradict) the literary evidence from the Christian Testament and the early church fathers. Let us explore the archaeological evidence from cities along the Via Egnatia, moving from East to West starting in Neapolis.

The ancient city of *Neapolis*, mentioned in Acts 16:11 and now known as Kavala, was Philippi's port. Neapolis was founded in the middle of the seventh century BCE and, later, was a member of the Athenian League. Some of the finds from Neapolis include sacred hearths, building walls, column capitals and deposits of pottery and figurines, many of which are housed in the Kavala Museum. The fact that the pottery originated in such places as Asia Minor,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2006) 346 and passim.



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Lesbos, Attica, Corinth and the Cyclades attests to Neapolis's strategic location as a trading post.<sup>4</sup> While few traces of the ancient city remain, a sanctuary to the Parthenos – most likely the Thracian goddess Artemis Tauropolos or Bendis in Hellenized form, the patron goddess of the city – has been excavated.<sup>5</sup>

*Philippi* was well known in the first centuries of the Common Era because of its association with the battle in 42 BCE between Brutus and Cassius on one side and Antony and Octavian on the other. Octavian won that match and ultimately became Emperor Augustus. Excavations at Philippi have revealed the imperial-era forum, including temples to the emperor and empress, a colossal monument base to the deified Livia (wife of Augustus), and the remains of six early Byzantine basilicas.<sup>6</sup> So far, no physical evidence has been found attesting to a Jewish community at Philippi (although one may be intimated in Acts 16).

Philippi's major deities were the goddesses Artemis/Diana and the Egyptian Isis and the male divinities Sylvanus, Dionysos and the Thracian Horseman, a popular deity in the second and third centuries CE associated with healing and the afterlife.<sup>7</sup> Artemis is especially significant and prominent. Along with unidentified priestesses, Artemis is the figure portrayed most frequently on Philippi's unique rock reliefs, carved on the acropolis hill around 200 CE;<sup>8</sup> the reliefs exhibit a female to male ratio of seven to one,<sup>9</sup> and it is highly probable that women carved most of them.<sup>10</sup> By the third century, the hill was home to at least two temple complexes – to the wood god Sylvanus and Isis – and an open-air shrine to Artemis. The Sylvanus and Artemis cults were flourishing by the mid- to late-second century, while the temple to Isis appears to have been constructed in the early third.<sup>11</sup> It is highly likely that Philippi was a pilgrimage site at various times in its history, possibly for people in need of healing in cultic waters associated with both Artemis and Isis.<sup>12</sup>

Next along the route is *Amphipolis*, located on the eastern bank of the Strymon River. The site has been well excavated, and many of its finds are exhibited in the site museum.<sup>13</sup> Excavations show that the area has been inhabited from at least the Neolithic era on both banks of the river, with continuous habitation into the Bronze Age.<sup>14</sup> In Hellenistic times (approximately 323-31 BCE), Amphipolis was a principal mint of the kings of Macedon, and under the Romans it was a "free city" and the capital of Macedonia Prima.<sup>15</sup> The city was known for its wine, oil, wood and woolen textiles.<sup>16</sup> From Roman and earlier eras, archaeologists have found revealing graves containing terra-cotta figures, pots and gold jewelry in various forms, and the stylobate of a large stoa of the Roman or early Christian era.<sup>17</sup> Fine mosaics of geometric motifs, fountains, plants, fish, birds and animals also decorated the five early Christian buildings that have emerged.

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<sup>4</sup> Demetrios Lazarides, "Neapolis," in Richard Stillwell, ed., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) 614.

<sup>5</sup> Lazarides, "Neapolis," 614.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Collart, "Inscriptions de Philippes," *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 57 (1933) 340-41; Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship at Philippi: Diana/Artemis and Other Cults in the Early Christian Era* (Portland, ME: Astarte Shell Press, 1995) 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Valerie A. Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship* 69-74.

<sup>8</sup> Artemis and Diana will be used interchangeably. Bendis is the Thracian counterpart of this goddess.

<sup>9</sup> Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship*, 25-44, has a complete analysis of Philippi and the rock reliefs.

<sup>10</sup> Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship*, 103-27.

<sup>11</sup> Valerie A. Abrahamsen, *Goddess and God: A Holy Tension in the First Christian Centuries* (Marco Polo Monographs 10. Warren Center, PA: Shangri-La Publications, 2006) 173.

<sup>12</sup> Charalambos Bakirtzis, "Paul and Philippi: The Archaeological Evidence," in Charalambos Bakirtzis and Helmut Koester, eds., *Philippi at the Time of Paul and after His Death* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998) 44-48; Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship*, 168-72.

<sup>13</sup> Clyde E. Fant and Mitchell G. Reddish, *A Guide to Biblical Sites in Greece and Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> "Amphipolis," Hellenic Ministry of Culture, [http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/3/eh351.jsp?obj\\_id=2403](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/3/eh351.jsp?obj_id=2403), accessed June 5, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Pliny, *HN* 4.38. See also "Amphipolis," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> J.D. Wineland, "Amphipolis," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1, 216-17 (New York: Doubleday, 1992). See also Timothy E. Gregory and Nancy P. Ševčenko, "Amphipolis," in Alexander P. Kazhdan, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Vol. 1 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 80-81.

<sup>17</sup> Demetrios Lazarides, "Amphipolis," in Stillwell, ed., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) 52.



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The city had two walls in antiquity, one that enclosed most of the city and another that encircled the acropolis. Several buildings that would have existed prior to and during the time of Paul and his contemporaries have been found within the inner wall: a house, gymnasium and sanctuary to Klio, one of the nine muses, from the fourth century BCE; and a house dated to the second century BCE.<sup>18</sup> As was true with many cities in this region, the chief deity of Amphipolis was Artemis Tauropolos or Brauronia; her head was depicted on many coins minted there.<sup>19</sup> Acts of the Apostles is silent on what Paul and his fellow missionaries would have encountered here, but we can be certain that Artemis worshipers would have been present.

*Apollonia* is approximately 27 miles from Amphipolis and 30 miles east of Thessaloniki. At Apollonia it was the ancient goddesses Demeter and Kore who were the most favored. Their worship in the nearby region of Lete, Mygdonia, of which Apollonia was a part, began in Late Archaic times (800-379 BCE) in an open-air sanctuary. Two temples were then constructed in the second and third centuries CE. Small marble statues from the Hellenistic era attest to worship of the Mother of the Gods, Aphrodite and Artemis in addition to Demeter and Kore; Artemis was the daughter of Leto, after whom the city of Lete was named.<sup>20</sup> In summer 2000, archaeologists discovered a statue of the goddess Nike of Samothrace, dated to the fourth century BCE, as well as fifth-century BCE fortifying walls, five towers, two pottery kilns and 16 stone slab graves. These finds helped mark Apollonia's location, which had only been scarcely known except for its mention in Acts 17:1. These discoveries enabled the archaeologists to estimate that Apollonia may have had a population as large as 10,000 and to have existed from the fifth century BCE through the eighth century CE.<sup>21</sup> The evidence from Apollonia and the wider region of Lete point not only to the longevity of these cults but also their persistence well into Paul's time and later.

*Thessaloniki* had a long and rich history. Founded by the Macedonian king Cassander in 316/15 BCE, it "was a vibrant and politically significant metropolitan center" from its founding into the Byzantine era.<sup>22</sup> In Roman times, it was the chief port of Macedonia, the capital of the Roman province and a Roman mint. By about 250 CE, it had been made an official Roman colony. In the Byzantine era, it was the second city of the empire after Constantinople.<sup>23</sup> At least three basilicas were constructed in the city: St. Demetrios, Acheiropoietos, and one under present-day Hagia Sophia.<sup>24</sup>

Evidence has been found from the Hellenistic and Roman periods for cults of Kybele, Mithras, Dionysos, the emperor, Herakles, Apollo and Aphrodite. Attestation of worship of the Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis, her husband/brother, was especially prominent. A Serapis sanctuary consisting of several rooms dating to the Hellenistic era yielded about 69 inscriptions and various statuary depicting Serapis, Isis, their son Horus/Harpocrates, Aphrodite-Harmony and Isis-Kybele. The cult had a metropolitan flavor by Paul's time and a syncretistic relationship to Dionysos.<sup>25</sup>

Also interesting is the later history of Thessaloniki's city or protector deities. In the second and third centuries CE, long after the time of Paul, the city's patron deity was the Cabiros, a young prince murdered by his two brothers. His image was depicted on coins with the figure of Tyche (Lady Luck) on the reverse. As Christianity took hold, legends about the Christian martyr St. Demetrios described him as a new city protector, replacing the Cabiros. In these legends, the saint was linked to the Lady Eutaxia ("good order") and later with the Virgin Mary, which we will

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<sup>18</sup> Fant and Reddish, *Guide*, 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> "Amphipolis," in Smith, ed., *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography*, Vol. I, 125-27 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1870).

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2022/04/04/archaeological-museum-of-thessaloniki-new-entries-new-approaches/>, accessed October 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Fant and Reddish, *Guide*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Laura Nasrallah, "Introduction," in Laura Nasrallah, Charalambos Bakirtzis and Steven J. Friesen, eds., *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē: Studies in Religion and Archaeology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) 1.

<sup>23</sup> H.G.L. Hammond, "Thessalonica," in N.G.L. Hammond and H.H. Scullard, eds., *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 1062.

<sup>24</sup> Nasrallah, "Introduction," in Nasrallah et al, eds., *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Holland L. Hendrix, "Thessalonica," in David Noel Freedman, Editor-in-Chief, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1992) Vol. 6, 523-25. See also M. Vickers, "Thessalonike," in Stillwell, *Princeton Encyclopedia*, 912-13. Religious syncretism can be defined as "fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices" (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/religious-syncretism>, accessed October 2022).



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explore more below.<sup>26</sup> This mix of powerful male and female deities and personifications as city protectors during the formation of the early church occurs throughout the Mediterranean.

*Pella*, about 25 miles northwest of Thessaloniki, was a capital of Macedonia from the reign of Archelaos until approximately 146 BCE, when it was replaced by Thessaloniki.<sup>27</sup> Pella's inhabitants were proud that their city was the birthplace of Alexander the Great. Pella appears in literary evidence from writers of the imperial and early Byzantine eras: Cicero (58 CE), Dio Chrysostom (c. 40 – c. 115 CE), Lucian of Samosata (180 CE), Dio Cassius (c. 155 – c. 235 CE), and the historian Eusebius (263-339 CE, reporting on the return of Jewish Christians during the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 CE).<sup>28</sup>

While remains from the time of Paul have been elusive to archaeologists, those from Classical and Hellenistic times attest to the veneration of deities such as Dionysos, Asklepios, the Great Gods, the Muses, Zeus Meilichios and Herakles, and Athena Alkidemos.<sup>29</sup> A temple to Demeter and Persephone, probably active between the last quarter of the fourth and the end of the second centuries BCE, has been found northeast of the city.<sup>30</sup> This Thesmophorion, excavated in 1980-81 (but not published until 1996), had an altar in the center. Around the altar several vases and ceramic votive figurines were uncovered; they included representations of deities such as Plouton, Artemis, Dionysos and Pan. While this complex is earlier than the imperial era, a terracotta votive figurine of Demeter and Persephone from the Sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods and Aphrodite has been dated as late as the first century BCE.<sup>31</sup> Pella might not have been the prominent city that Philippi and Thessaloniki were, but it probably was well known to early Jesus missionaries and adds to our information about the Jesus movement along the Via Egnatia.

Founded by a Thracian tribe about 700 BCE, *Edessa* in Macedonia was the first capital of Macedonia in historical times, until King Archelaos (413-399 BCE) transferred his seat of power to Pella. While it does not appear in the Christian Testament, Edessa is mentioned by a number of ancient writers, including Diodorus, Strabo, Plutarch and Ptolemy, and it most likely would have been visited by early Jesus missionaries, if not specifically by Paul and his immediate circle. To date none of the ancient monuments mentioned by ancient authors have been uncovered in the excavations; parts of the city walls and gates, towers, marble architectural fragments, inscriptions and sculpture have been found, many of which date from the Roman era and are housed in the Edessa and Thessaloniki Museums. An ancient Christian basilica and portions of other Byzantine monuments have also been found,<sup>32</sup> as have remains to sanctuaries of Aphrodite and Kybele (Mother of the Gods) and of Demeter and Persephone.<sup>33</sup>

The town of *Berea* (alternate spellings: Beroea, Veria, Veroia) lies somewhat south of the Via Egnatia near Edessa and is mentioned in Acts 17:10-13. The Acts story puts a positive spin on Paul and fellow missionary Silas' success in converting both Jews and pagans – women and men – to the Jesus message. This theological perspective obscures the picture that emerges from the archaeological evidence. First, the city has been inhabited for at least 10,000 years,<sup>34</sup> and epigraphic evidence has been found for cults to Herakles, Asklepios, Hermes, Zeus and others.<sup>35</sup> During the first century CE, Berea was favored by several emperors, and it "became an international city of varied races and religions,"<sup>36</sup> so ancient pagan deities were long entrenched and would have been encountered by Paul and other Jesus missionaries.

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<sup>26</sup> Hendrix, "Thessalonica," Vol. 6, 525.

<sup>27</sup> N.G.L. Hammond, "Pella," in Hammond, N.G.L. and H.H. Scullard, eds. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 795.

<sup>28</sup> G.A. Williamson, tr., *Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965) 111.

<sup>29</sup> Ph. M. Petsas, "Pella," in Stillwell, *Princeton Encyclopedia*, 685-86.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.my-favourite-planet.de/english/europe/greece/macedonia/pella/pella-01.html>, accessed October 2022. Fant and Reddish do not include Pella or Edessa.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.my-favourite-planet.de/english/people/d1/demeter.html#pella-thesmophorion>, accessed October 2022; see also <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pella>.

<sup>32</sup> Ph. M. Petsas, "Edessa," in Stillwell, *Princeton Encyclopedia*, 292-93.

<sup>33</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaeological\\_Museum\\_of\\_Pella](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaeological_Museum_of_Pella), accessed 10/4/2022.

<sup>34</sup> <https://greekcitytimes.com/2018/11/21/visiting-veria-greeces-beautiful-historical-town/>, accessed 10/4/2022.]

<sup>35</sup> Ph.M. Petsas, "Beroia," in Stillwell, *Princeton Encyclopedia*, 150-51.

<sup>36</sup> Fant and Reddish, *Guide*, 39.



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At the far western end of the Via Egnatia is the ancient region of *Illyricum*, which now lies mainly in Albania. Several cities in this area have been excavated in recent years; since Paul does not mention any particular cities in his brief mention at Rom 15:19, we can look at a sampling to see what the general atmosphere may have been before, during and shortly after his time. *Apollonia* (not to be confused with the Apollonia in Greece that we have discussed above) was named after the god Apollo. In addition, a rectangular monument dedicated to the Nymphs (female water deities) had been built in the middle of the third century BCE, the city's zenith. Cicero described Apollonia as "a great and important city," and Octavian, the future emperor Augustus (63 BCE - 14 CE), studied rhetoric there,<sup>37</sup> so the city was definitely known at the time of Paul. Epigraphic evidence attests a statue of Aphrodite predating the Roman period. The nearby necropolis contains Greek tombs dating to the sixth century BCE and Roman-era tombs shaped like small temples.<sup>38</sup>

*Amantia* was founded around the middle of the fifth century BCE and was the historical capital of the ancient Greek tribe of the Amantes. Its best-preserved monument is its stadium, built in the first half of the third century BCE and able to accommodate approximately 4,000 people. Outside the city's walls was a colonnaded Doric-style temple dedicated to Aphrodite. "The city remained a small urban centre and was the seat of a bishopric in early Christian times. The temple of Aphrodite was demolished, and a Christian basilica was built near the ruins using its materials." Amantia may have been abandoned by the end of the sixth century CE.

Other cities in Illyricum similarly boasted Christian basilicas in the Byzantine era and were seats of bishops, showing not just the spread of Christianity to all corners of the Mediterranean region but also the persistence and importance of ancient religion and religious practice for millennia. As excavations continue, we will undoubtedly glean additional information about the religious landscape that shaped the early Jesus movement and its successors.

## WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE JESUS MOVEMENT

As we have seen, Paul and other early missionaries of the Jesus message would have encountered pagan deities and their worshipers in every city they visited. Both women and men were those worshipers.

As Christianity developed, the "orthodox" church began to restrict leadership roles to men. Male church leaders supported these restrictions using several arguments, starting with passages in the Christian Testament that they understood as authoritative. Wives were instructed to be subject to their husbands (Eph 5:22-24 and Col 3:18), and women must keep silence in church (I Tim. 2:8-15); the letters from which these passages come – Ephesians, Colossians and I Timothy – were traditionally attributed to St. Paul. However, careful modern scholarship has shown that these letters were written after Paul's death and thus written by authors other than Paul.

Church fathers furthered the early attempts to restrict women's leadership roles. Tertullian (155 – 245 CE) was one of the most vociferous, making a number of arguments that have had centuries of influence on Christianity and the West: every woman carries the curse of Eve, as originator of sin; woman is a source of temptation; it is among heretics that women teach, dispute, heal and, perhaps, baptize; and it is better for a man not to marry, because it is tainted with sexual lust.<sup>39</sup> Augustine (354-430), Jerome (342-420) and Ambrose (339-97) developed similar rationales,<sup>40</sup> which led, by the time of Pope Gregory VII (p. 1073-1085), to the exclusion of women "from every level of church governance" and from ministries that they had served for centuries.<sup>41</sup>

These negative sentiments were not universal in the early Jesus movement, and Paul is a major case in point. Contrary to traditional perspectives by church authorities about Paul and the women around him, some of the most

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1522/illyria---exploring-ancient-albania/>, accessed October 2022, and <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5885/> (March 2014), accessed December 2022. See also P.C. Sestieri, "Apollonia," in Stillwell, *Princeton Encyclopedia*, 70-71.

<sup>38</sup> Sestieri, "Apollonia," in Stillwell, *Princeton Encyclopedia*, 71.

<sup>39</sup> <https://womenpriests.org/tradition/tertul-tertullian/>, accessed October 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Trevor Beeson, *The Church's Other Half: Women's Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 2011) 7-8.

<sup>41</sup> Rebecca Moore, *Women in Christian Traditions* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015) 77.



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important passages in Paul's authentic letters demonstrate not only his high regard for women but also the various leadership roles they had. His letter to the Romans is known as the most doctrinally significant of the letters.<sup>42</sup> Paul probably wrote or dictated it in early spring 57 CE, and chapter 16 of that letter mentions 10 named and unnamed women (approximately one-third of the 35 people mentioned in the letter). We know a little about a few of them: Mary (verse 6) exercised a leadership role;<sup>43</sup> the mother of Rufus (verse 13) showed Paul generous hospitality;<sup>44</sup> and Julia (verse 15), wife of Philologus, and Nereus' sister (also verse 15), were probably all members of a small Roman house church.<sup>45</sup>

Recent scholarship has greatly expanded our knowledge about several of the other women in Rom 16.

- *Phoebe* (verses 1-2) was probably a Gentile, not Jewish. She may have been given the great responsibility of carrying Paul's letter to the Romans; thus she could well have functioned as the authoritative interpreter of Paul's message and his personal envoy.<sup>46</sup> Her role was deacon in the Jesus group at Cenchreae, Corinth's eastern port city. Deacon was a ministry of preaching and teaching – a leadership role over the whole group. Paul also designated Phoebe as a *prostatis*, meaning leader, president, presiding officer, guardian or patron. The emphasis is probably on patronage, and Paul was greatly in her debt. Phoebe was one of Paul's coworkers, just like the men in the circle, and she had some level of wealth and independence – she did not seem to be judged by men in her life.<sup>47</sup>
- *Prisca/Priscilla* (verse 3). Priscilla is the diminutive form of Prisca. She is cited six times in the Christian Testament – twice in Paul's letters, several times in Acts 18, and once in II Timothy. She is always mentioned with Aquila, her husband, and both were probably tentmakers. She was "a very important, well-traveled missionary and church leader whose work on occasion intersected with that of Paul." Husband and wife were forced to leave Rome because of Emperor Claudius' edict expelling all Jews (49 CE). They were already active as missionaries in the Jesus movement before Paul met them in Corinth. Their roles would have included preaching, teaching, and presiding, and they carried out their work in a house church setting. Jesus followers in that house would have included slaves, freedmen, freedwomen, and workers. The leader was most likely Priscilla, since she is the one listed first several times. It was after Prisca and Aquila moved back to Rome when the edict was lifted in 54 CE that Paul wrote to them. They must have been relatively well off and may have been patrons or benefactors of Paul, but their work could be risky. Priscilla's memory lasted down through the ages.<sup>48</sup>
- *Junia* (verse 7) is particularly important and intriguing. Previous modern Biblical scholars misinterpreted the name Junia as masculine, although the church fathers had attested her as a woman. However, in ancient inscriptions, the male name Junias is unattested while the female Latin name Junia occurs over 250 times in Greek and Latin inscriptions from Rome alone. Based on this passage in Rom 16, we can glean that she held a leadership role and may have done this within the Jewish community before becoming a Jesus follower. Her circle would have included both men and women. Junia had been in prison, perhaps for her work on behalf of the mission. She may have been a freedwoman or the descendant of a slave freed by a member of the Junian clan. Significantly, Junia is the only woman called an apostle in the Christian Testament, which accounts for the assumption on the part of earlier scholars that she had to have been a man. As an apostle, she must have claimed to have seen the post-crucifixion

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Letter-of-Paul-to-the-Romans>, accessed October 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, "Mary 7," in Carol Meyers, Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000) 124.

<sup>44</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, "Mother of Rufus," in Meyers et al, *Women in Scripture*, 469.

<sup>45</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, in Meyers et al, *Women in Scripture* – "Julia," 106-07, and "Sister of Nereus," 470.

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth A. McCabe, *An Examination of the Isis Cult with Preliminary Exploration into New Testament Studies* (Lanham/Boulder/New York: University Press of America, 2008) 75.

<sup>47</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, "Phoebe," in Meyers et al, *Women in Scripture*, 134-36.

<sup>48</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, "Prisca/Priscilla," in Meyers et al, *Women in Scripture*, 136-37.



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Jesus and been engaged in missionary work,<sup>49</sup> and the role of apostle has not traditionally been seen as legitimate for women.

- *Tryphaena and Tryphosa* (verse 12). The names of these paired women derive from a Greek verb having sexual overtones (“to live luxuriously,” etc.), so they may have been sex workers in the same brothel before joining the Jesus movement. They were probably slaves or freedwomen with the same patron and life partners functioning as a missionary pair.<sup>50</sup>
- *Persis* (verse 12). The phrase “the beloved Persis” indicates Paul’s high esteem for this woman, since Paul uses “the” with “beloved” rather than “my,” as he does elsewhere. Paul’s reference to Persis as having “worked hard in the Lord” is parallel to how Paul refers to his own apostolic labor and that of leaders within local congregations; that is, Persis should be counted among the other (mainly male) leaders of the movement. Thus, Persis “was clearly a pillar, if not one of the founders, of the Roman church.”<sup>51</sup> Persis, like Phoebe, may have worked alone as a missionary in the movement (although neither woman probably would have traveled alone). Persis and the other women of Rom 16 reveal “the importance of geographical mobility (for purposes of both trade and religious conviction) to the expansion of the Pauline mission.”<sup>52</sup> Like many of these other women, Persis was unlikely to have been born Jewish,<sup>53</sup> which coincides with Paul’s primary mission to non-Jews. Persis may have been a slave or freedwoman.<sup>54</sup>

When we look specifically at Paul’s relationship with women in conjunction with the Egnatian communities, we find the missionary pair of Euodia/Evodia and Syntyche mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Philippian community, Phil 4:2-3: “I beg Euodia, and I beg Syntyche, to agree together in the Lord’s fellowship. Yes, and you too, my loyal comrade, I ask you to help these women, who shared my struggles in the cause of the Gospel, with Clement and my other fellow-workers, whose names are in the roll of the living” (New English Bible). Scholar Mary Rose D’Angelo makes several fascinating observations: “Evodia and Syntyche can be seen as a missionary couple, partners in the mission, rather than as individual members of Paul’s missionary team. They may in fact have been independent of Paul. . . . Second, . . . the ‘religious conflict’ is a dispute not between Evodia and Syntyche but between Paul on the one hand and the two women missionaries on the other.”<sup>55</sup> Evodia and Syntyche are thus on par with the heterosexual missionary pairs of Prisca and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia, Philologus and Julia, and Nereus and his “sister” in Rom 16.

While we know of no specific women leaders in the Thessalonian community, we can assume that there probably were, given the other examples we have cited.

Paul and other male missionaries would have interacted with and known about women leaders in the pagan cults, especially goddess cults – it was normative. We know that priestesses historically served many of the goddesses in the Egnatian cities – Artemis at Neapolis, Philippi, Amphipolis, and Greek Apollonia; Aphrodite (sometimes with the Mother of the Gods/Kybele) at Greek Apollonia, Thessaloniki, Pella, Edessa, Apollonia in Illyricum, and Amantia; Demeter and Kore/Persephone at Greek Apollonia, Pella, and Edessa; and Isis at Philippi, Greek Apollonia, and Thessaloniki. In addition, throughout antiquity, the cult of Dionysos attracted female worshippers – maenads – who

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<sup>49</sup> Bernadette J. Brooten, “Junia,” in Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds., *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 405.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Rose D’Angelo, in Meyers et al, *Women in Scripture* – “Tryphaena,” 165-66, and “Tryphosa,” 166.

<sup>51</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, “Persis,” in Meyers et al, *Women in Scripture*, 134.

<sup>52</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Reading Real Women through the Undisputed Letters of Paul,” in Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 207.

<sup>53</sup> Ross S. Kraemer, “Jewish Women and Christian Origins,” in Kraemer and D’Angelo, *Women and Christian Origins*, 43.

<sup>54</sup> Bassler, “Persis,” in Meyers et al, *Women in Scripture*, 134.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Women Partners in the New Testament,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6 (1990) 76. See also the discussion in Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 59f.



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played major roles in the cult's initiation rites;<sup>56</sup> maenads would have been present at Philippi, Thessaloniki, and Pella.

When these women learned about and were attracted to the Jesus movement, they would have expected to be included in similar ways that they had been included in the traditional cults. Bishop Atto of Vercelli, writing in the tenth century but commenting on the early church, noted that because women knew both pagan rites and philosophical teachings they would have converted easily to the new movement and held leadership roles: "*presbyterae* [women presbyters] assumed the office of preaching, leading, and teaching."<sup>57</sup>

### ***Paul, Artemis and Mary***

Now that we know more about the cities along the Via Egnatia visited by early Jesus missionaries, and witness the active involvement of women in those cities' pagan cults, we can turn our attention to certain specific female deities. This is important for the history of Christianity for two reasons: first, it enables us to argue clearly that people revered goddesses before, during and after the time of the early Jesus movement; and second, it shows the trajectory of goddess worship from Paul's time into the early Byzantine era.

One goddess in particular appears prominently along the Via Egnatia: Artemis/Diana. As we have noted, evidence for her cult has been found at Neapolis, Philippi, Amphipolis, and Greek Apollonia. A descendant of the ancient all-powerful nature goddess, Artemis was associated with the hunt, healing, the protection of women in childbirth and of children, and the birth-death-regeneration cycle.<sup>58</sup> Yet her cult was virtually erased from the Christian Testament texts.

Artemis does manifest herself as a major competitor to the Jesus movement and Paul in Acts 19:25-41 – at Ephesus in Asia Minor. The confrontation between Jesus followers and Artemis worshipers in this passage revolved around finances: the town's silversmiths feared loss of income if Artemis devotees converted to the new movement.<sup>59</sup>

The Acts accounts may be fictitious but do suggest an early concern on the part of Jesus missionaries that Artemis posed challenges, perhaps both because of the goddess' popularity and the leadership roles of women in her cult. Starting around the time of the circulation of Acts in the early second century, veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus, began to grow throughout the empire. The non-canonical *Protevangelium (Gospel) of James*, written around the second half of the second century, focuses primarily on Mary.<sup>60</sup> In fact, it was the *Protevangelium* that elevated "Mary in the popular mind into the realms of the great virgin-mother goddesses of the Greco-Roman world,"<sup>61</sup> such as Artemis.

Other texts about Mary appeared in subsequent centuries. The Dormition narratives, for instance, that relate stories about Mary's death and bodily assumption into heaven had taken hold by at least the fourth century. In one version,

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<sup>56</sup> Lynn R. LiDonnici, "Women's Religions and Religious Lives in the Greco-Roman City," in Kraemer and D'Angelo, *Women and Christian Origins*, 93.

<sup>57</sup> Ilaria Ramelli, "Theosebia: A Presbyter of the Catholic Church," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Fall 2010) 87, n. 24.

<sup>58</sup> See Abrahamsen, *Goddess and God*, 176-81, for a fuller discussion.

<sup>59</sup> Artemis of the Ephesians also figures in an apocryphal story about St. John the Evangelist. In the second-century account in *Acts of John* 40-42, hostility against Artemis is palpable. John prays, "May the deity of this place, which has deceived so many, now also give way to your name, and thus show your mercy on this place!" Her altar splits into many parts, the oblations fall to the ground, seven of the idols are destroyed, and half of the temple plunges to earth. When the roof comes down, the priest is killed, leading the Ephesians to worship John's God and plead for his mercy. See *Acts of John* 40-42 as cited in David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 182. See also Knut Schäferdiek, "The Acts of John," in Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha. Vol. Two: Writings Relating to the Apostles: Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, revised ed. (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 152-212.

<sup>60</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 3, 29-32.

<sup>61</sup> John Van den Hengel, "Miriam of Nazareth: Between Symbol and History," in Amy-Jill Levine ed., with Maria Mayo Robbins, *A Feminist Companion to Mariology* (London and New York: T & T Clark International, a Continuum imprint, 2005) 134-35.



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when Jesus (in heaven) learned that Mary was dying, he came down to take her back to heaven with him.<sup>62</sup> The explicit linking of Mary with her heavenly son further shows that some communities viewed Mary in the same way that they viewed their traditional goddesses.

The Third General Council of the church – held at Ephesus in 431 CE<sup>63</sup> – declared Mary “Theotokos,” God-bearer, most likely before the Artemis cult there had completely died out. Significantly, the Ephesian statue of Artemis, now housed in the Louvre in Paris, is unlike any other Artemis statues from the ancient world; rather than clad as the virgin hunter, her torso is covered with breasts.<sup>64</sup> Thus, if as this suggests she was viewed as mother, “she was the unchallenged goddess [of Asia Minor], ruler of all. . . . [I]t can be no accident that popular legend eventually insisted that the Virgin Mary had died at Ephes[us], and that her house was indeed still to be seen high in the rugged mountains southwest of Artemis’ shrine.”<sup>65</sup> In some sense, then, Mary had become exalted as the new Artemis, at Ephesus and elsewhere throughout the empire – Artemis and Mary had merged in people’s minds.

### ***Isis and Mary at Philippi***

The Egyptian goddess Isis was a relatively new deity in the empire, often worshiped along with her husband/brother Osiris/Serapis and her son Horus/Harpocrates. Isis became popular throughout the empire in large part because her cult addressed the personal needs of people, as opposed to the cult of the emperors whose primary concern was the peace and prosperity of the empire. Isis would have met a devotee’s needs around what happens after death, personal safety and security, and other challenges of everyday life.<sup>66</sup>

Like Artemis/Diana, Isis was a healing deity that was linked to women and children.<sup>67</sup> The Isis temple at Philippi, which dates to the second or third century CE, was built very close to the Artemis reliefs that are carved on the acropolis hill, probably because of the healing springs there (now long gone).<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, three or possibly four inscriptions from Philippi that honor Isis (or Isis and Serapis), dating to the third century CE, were offered by men,<sup>69</sup> revealing not only the longevity of this cult well after the time of Paul but also its attraction to both men and women.

Healing was believed since prehistoric times to be accomplished through water and milk – mainly mother’s milk – both of which continued to be associated with Graeco-Roman goddesses. The image of Isis suckling Horus connects the elements of the ideal mother who nourishes her child, the healing and health-promoting powers of her milk, and the curative properties of water. This image was adopted by Christians as Mary nursing Jesus.<sup>70</sup> The connection with water was evident at Philippi, with the female deities linked to water and healing; Philippi in fact emerged over time as a pilgrimage site for people in need of healing in those waters.<sup>71</sup>

One significant find from Philippi was an altar inscribed to “Queen Isis,” discovered near one of Philippi’s city gates. A dove and cross, Christian symbols, were carved on one side; nothing was defaced. This altar, probably dating to the third century CE, had been moved – with some difficulty – to this location sometime in antiquity, probably in the face of some impending doom. This altar and its inscription indicate that Philippians were appealing to Isis for

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<sup>62</sup> Ally Keteusz, “Dormition Urtext? Oldest Dormition Wall Painting Combines the Great Angel and Women with Censers,” in Mary Ann Beavis and Ally Keteusz, eds., *Rediscovering the Marys: Maria, Mariamne, Miriam* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2020) 190.

<sup>63</sup> “Ephesus, Council of (431),” in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 462.

<sup>64</sup> Or possibly testicles (Christine M. Thomas, “On Not Finding Small Finds: Spatial Discourse in Early Christianity at Ephesus and Elsewhere,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Boston, MA, November 1999).

<sup>65</sup> Vincent Scully, *The Earth, the Temple and the Gods*, revised ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979; first printed 1962) 90.

<sup>66</sup> McCabe, *Isis Cult*, 55-56.

<sup>67</sup> Lilian Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice* (Uppsala: Coniectanea Biblica; New Testament Series 20, 1988) 81-82, 117-19.

<sup>68</sup> Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship*, 138.

<sup>69</sup> Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship*, 35.

<sup>70</sup> Robert J. Miller, *Born Divine: The Births of Jesus and Other Sons of God* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003) 300-01; see also Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship*, 138.

<sup>71</sup> Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship*, 45-48, 129-31.



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the well-being of the colony.<sup>72</sup> The title “queen,” “originally given to Juno, Isis and many others. . . came to Mary quite naturally in iconography and mosaics,” such as Mary enthroned beside Christ in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome. Imagery and symbolism merge: “Mary reigns with Jesus.”<sup>73</sup>

Near the Isis altar, notably, archaeologists uncovered a fifth- or sixth-century inscription to Jesus, “born of the Virgin Mary,” asking for the city’s protection from some unknown peril.<sup>74</sup> Thus the women and men of Philippi were simultaneously venerating Isis, Jesus and Mary in the early Byzantine era and viewing them as deities that protected the entire city. In the goddess-dominated atmosphere of the community, the recitation of the formula “born of the Virgin Mary” in this short petition parallels how Mary and Jesus were viewed throughout the empire at this time.

### ***Isis and Mary at Thessaloniki***

As we noted above, Isis became a prominent deity at Thessaloniki as Christianity developed, and the city had a significant sanctuary to Isis and Serapis in the Hellenistic era. Later, in the second and third centuries CE, devotees were worshipping gods as city or protector deities. Thessaloniki’s patron deity was the Cabiros, a young prince murdered by his two brothers. Later legends about the Christian martyr St. Demetrios (early fourth century CE) portrayed the saint as a new city protector, replacing the Cabiros. In the St. Demetrios legends, Lady Eutaxia, the female personification of civil order, was always present with the saint.<sup>75</sup>

According to archaeologist Charalambos Bakirtzis, St. Demetrios shared the basilica with Mary in a similar way that Serapis shared a temple and altar with Isis.<sup>76</sup> Ever-present Lady Eutaxia (“good order”) was equated with the goddess Fortune (Tyche) of the city.<sup>77</sup>

Other important links between the traditional pagan deities and the Christian pantheon throughout the empire are noteworthy. The images of Isis nursing Horus and Mary nursing Jesus, mentioned above, were especially significant for women: mother (Isis, Mary), son (Horus, Jesus), and mother’s milk (nursing). These connections converge by the end of the sixth century CE at Thessaloniki: the city was providing free medical care in the basilica of St. Demetrios. Thus treatments at the hospital in the basilica, and the stress on health and healing in the cults we have been examining, paralleled those practiced in the local Serapis sanctuary at Thessaloniki.<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, a “recurring theme in the Christian mosaics in [the St. Demetrios basilica] is children... [This] depiction of children ... has to do with its curative properties...” An inscription thanking the Mother of God for a healing leads Bakirtzis to conclude that “the basilica of St. Demetrios, as a Christian healing center, replaced the [Asklepios sanctuary] and the Sarapeion as the main healing centers of Roman and Late Roman Thessalonikē.”

Finally, many of the Christian mosaics at St. Demetrios depict children, and an inscription connected with one of these mosaics gives thanks to Mary, the Mother of God, for an act of healing. This indicates, therefore, that the Christian basilica had effectively replaced the Asklepios and Serapis sanctuaries as the primary healing center of the region.<sup>79</sup> At Thessaloniki, we have moved over time from Isis, Serapis, Horus, healing and children; to St. Demetrios, Lady Eutaxia and city protection; to Mary, the mother of Jesus/God, and children; to St. Demetrios, Mary, children and healing.

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<sup>72</sup> Denis Feissel, *Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de Macédoine du IIIe au VIe siècle* (Athens and Paris: BCH Supplement 8, 1983), 189-91; Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship*, 187-88.

<sup>73</sup> Van den Hengel, “Miriam of Nazareth,” 135.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Collart, ‘Le sanctuaire des dieux égyptiens à Philippes’, *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 53 (1929), 69-100; Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship*, 185-86.

<sup>75</sup> James Skedros, “Civic and Ecclesiastical Identity in Christian Thessalonikē,” in Nasrallah et al, eds, *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē*, 257.

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.thebyzantinelegacy.com/demetrios-thessaloniki>, accessed October 2022.

<sup>77</sup> Hendrix, “Thessalonica,” Vol. 6, 525.

<sup>78</sup> Charalambos Bakirtzis, “Late Antiquity and Christianity in Thessalonikē: Aspects of a Transformation,” in Nasrallah et al, eds., *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē*, 401.

<sup>79</sup> Bakirtzis, “Late Antiquity,” 402-05.



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## CONCLUSIONS

Examining the deities that were venerated in the cities along the Via Egnatia in the early years of the Jesus movement, and tracing the development of Christianity in these locations into the early Byzantine era, is instructive for many reasons. The influence of St. Paul in the history of Christianity, and even of the West in general, begins with the texts of the New (Christian) Testament: the authentic letters of Paul, those attributed to him but written after his death, and the very influential Acts of the Apostles. For centuries the narrative of the Christian “winners” is that Paul’s mission in spreading the “good news” of Jesus of Nazareth met some level of opposition but was basically successful in a short period of time and led directly to “orthodox” Christianity. That “brand” of Christianity effectively deprived women of leadership roles for centuries; even now, some branches of Christianity still deny women access to the priesthood.

When we closely examine archaeological evidence from the Egnatian cities, along with related literature, a larger and even more egalitarian picture emerges. Paul and other early missionaries of the Jesus movement labored closely with devotees to both male and female deities, and they knew that women served as leaders in many of those cults. Evidence from the authentic letters of Paul and contemporary letters from other authors demonstrates that the early missionaries often revered and respected women who joined the Jesus groups. Those women held titles such as apostle, deacon, and coworker, with many of them providing financial and other support to the Jesus missionaries.

Many of the deities long worshiped in the Egnatian cities had healing and health as major components; the goddesses descended from the Neolithic all-powerful nature deity whose healing was equated with and accomplished by water and mother’s milk. As the cult of Mary, mother of Jesus, grew in the Egnatian cities and throughout the empire, healing and health imagery was often borrowed by Christianity in the form of Mary nursing Jesus. Mary became revered, even until today in some circles, because people could relate to and draw strength from her presence, just as they and their ancestors would have done with female deities.

Archaeological evidence shows both the persistence and resilience of many of the pagan cults and the reason for this: they answered people’s needs and, for the most part, they were not annihilated by the growing Christian religion, at least not until well into the Byzantine era. The religious environment of the Egnatian cities was vibrant, diverse, and generally cooperative for centuries. Many converts added Jesus as an object of devotion to their religious repertory; Christianity was thus not an exclusive belief system that it came to be. The Jesus story attracted pagan devotees because it met personal and community needs and because its rituals and practices bore similarities to traditional, familiar ones.

As archaeological excavations continue in the cities along the Via Egnatia – places known to and visited by Paul and other early Jesus missionaries – more artifacts will be revealed and will even further illuminate the history of Christianity and the West.

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