

by [Peter Oakes](#)



In the ancient world, the city of Philippi was “the way through between Europe and Asia, like a gateway” ([Appian, *The Civil Wars* 4.106](#)). At this point in northeastern Greece, where the mountains running from Bulgaria push so tightly against marsh and hill that the only main road linking West and East is squeezed through the middle of a town, Mark Antony and Octavian (Augustus) had their showdown with Brutus and Cassius, Caesar’s killers and defenders of the republican status quo. Ninety years later, the route from the east brought Paul to found his first Christian group in Europe (Acts 16). He later wrote a letter to them (Philippians), as did Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, in the early second century. Philippi went on to become an important Christian center in late antiquity. The site is well preserved due to being abandoned in the Middle Ages, and it has been extensively excavated by French and, now, by Greek archaeologists.

Did you know...?

- Philippi was named after Philip II of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great (356 B.C.E.).
- Philippi is a well-preserved archaeological site in northeastern Greece.
- Philippi became a Roman colony when veteran soldiers were given land there after the battle of 42 B.C.E. in which the Roman republic effectively came to an end.
- Philippi was where Paul founded his first congregation in Europe, in about 49 C.E.
- The community at Philippi received letters from Paul and, in the second century C.E., from Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor.
- Philippi is the site of a unique collection of well over a hundred pictorial rock carvings, especially of women and the goddess Artemis.
- Philippi became a Christian center with several substantial church buildings and with bishops involved in church affairs beyond Philippi during the fourth to sixth centuries.

Was being a Roman colony a privilege or a curse?

Many commentators write about the privileges Philippi enjoyed because it was a Roman colony (Acts 16:12). The town operated under Roman law and was exempt from many taxes. Its citizens were citizens of Rome. Archaeologically the most striking effects of this are inscriptions attesting both a public library (for the maintenance of Latin culture) and the head of a troupe of Latin-speaking actors paid for by the town (see images 233, 476 at <http://www.philippi.de> images). Yet Paul wrote his letter to Philippi in Greek, and most names in the letter are Greek. How would Philippian Greeks of Paul’s day have felt about the Roman colony?

They probably felt many things in common with anyone who has lived under a foreign colony. The Greeks were not citizens. They could not vote or have access to the Roman law of which the colony was proud. They saw power and wealth mainly in Roman hands. The Greeks’ grandparents had lost land to the colonists, veteran soldiers who settled after the famous battle. On the other hand, the colony had brought prosperity. The archaeological remains indicate strong economic

growth, on which the Greeks would have depended for their livelihood. Would they have scrawled graffiti saying, "Romans, go home"? Probably not—well, actually, almost certainly not, because if they had done much of it, we would probably have found it by now.

Who are the women on the Philippian hillside?

If you visit Philippi, make a point of going off the beaten track on the way from the town center to the theater. Follow the bottom of the rocky hillside. You will find a gruesome site: a set of three rock carvings of a woman in a short cloak, kneeling on the back of a deer whose head she is pulling back in order to slit its throat. This is a sanctuary of the goddess Artemis or, in her Roman guise, Diana. Continue to the theater and climb right up to the back of the auditorium, then onto the hillside beyond. Carved into the rocks are dozens of pictures of women. Many are representations of Artemis, here seen standing with a bow. But many others appear to be women in normal clothes. Some are depicted with objects seen as associated with women, such as mirrors or distaffs. Others hold babies. Both Artemis and the women tend to be framed by depictions of structures that look like temples. Who are these women?

Some must be second- or third-century women because they are carved into rock faces left by quarrying for second-century town development. Others are hard to date because they are carved into native hillside rock. Biblical scholars have put forward three interesting theories about the women's identities. Lilian Portefaix argues they are devotees of Artemis, seeking Artemis's protection and an Artemis-like existence in afterlife. Valerie Abrahamsen argues they are priestesses of Artemis. Jason Lamoreaux argues they are devotees of Artemis using the inscriptions as thank-offerings for successful births.

Each theory has its strengths, although Lamoreaux is probably the most specific in the supporting material he offers from other sites. Scholars working in this area have also noted the prominence of women in New Testament texts relating to Philippi: Lydia and the possessed slave woman in Acts 16:14-18; Euodia and Syntyche in Phil 4:2-3. Can we relate them to archaeological remains from women in Philippi? One point is clear, regardless of interpretation: for a woman to abandon Artemis and follow Christ would not be something to undertake lightly.

Contributors



Peter Oakes Professor, University of Manchester. Peter Oakes is Professor of New Testament at the University of Manchester, UK. He is author of *Philippians: From People to Letter* (Cambridge University Press, 2001, 2007) and *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (SPCK/Fortress, 2009).

Bible Odessey website: <https://www..org/places/main-articles/philippi/>