Christian Life *in the* Greco-Roman City

The CIVIC *and* ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXTS *of* EARLY CHRISTIANITY

JASON BORGES

Foreword by David A. deSilva

"THE EARLY CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT COMES ALIVE IN A WHOLLY FRESH WAY"

This book offers an original and engaging analysis of life in the Greco-Roman city as seen through its public spaces. Drawing on primary sources and archaeological evidence, Jason Borges explores how seven key civic structures—the agora, temple, bath, prison, theater, library, and cemetery—shaped the lives, writings, and theology of early Christians.

"It is a brilliant idea for Jason Borges to conduct his readers on a tour of civic structures in the ancient city to explain not just their architecture but their function and social significance in everyday life. The early Christian social environment comes alive in a wholly fresh way. I thoroughly recommend this book—well-researched, clearly written, and excellently illustrated."

—**JOHN M. G. BARCLAY**, Durham University (emeritus)

"Blending his academic training as a church historian with his personal experiences living in Asia Minor, Borges shows us the New Testament world through its buildings. He goes beyond general facts, describing how these structures played a role in early Christianity and offering insights for specific biblical texts. With each chapter—whether discussing temples, prisons, or theaters—Borges becomes your perfect personal tour guide."

—**E. RANDOLPH RICHARDS**, Palm Beach Atlantic University (emeritus); coauthor of *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*

"A well-researched, amply documented, and user-friendly book that helps the modern reader easily imagine what life was like for the earliest Christians living in the Greco-Roman world. Numerous New Testament texts become instantly more understandable in light of Borges's captivating introductions to such key first-century institutions as the city, agora (ancient town square), temple, bath, prison, theater, library, and necropolis (cemetery). A valuable resource for layperson and scholar alike!"

—**JEFFREY A. D. WEIMA**, Calvin Theological Seminary

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INTRODUCTION

The Ancient City

When I was a kid, my family lived on a dairy farm in the country, so every day I traveled twenty miles into town for school. My mom was often late in picking me up from school because she had errands at the bank or grocery store. Whenever she was late, she expected me to wait at the county library across the street from the school. However, the nearby strip mall had a baseball card shop that was far more interesting to me, so I usually waited there. On days when I had a baseball game in the evening, we would stay in town instead of driving home and back. Until my game, we would wait at a local park or restaurant and then go to the baseball field.

The point of that opening paragraph was not to introduce me but rather to introduce the main topic of this book—civic structures. You probably did not notice, but the short paragraph mentions nine urban structures found in most (American) towns: school, bank, grocery store, library, strip mall, house, park, restaurant, and baseball field. I assumed that you, the reader, were familiar with those urban structures. Without any explanation from me, you mostly understood the nature and purpose of those places and perhaps even formed a mental picture of what the buildings looked like. You also understood the terms "farm," "country," and "town" without explanation. This is because we share common cultural knowledge about the modern cityscape. However, knowledge of modern structures is of little help when we encounter urban structures from another time and culture, such as those found in the NT.

Here is a paragraph, similar to the opening one, about someone living two thousand years ago. The young boy Saul grew up in a Greco-Roman city

named Tarsus. His family lived in tenement apartments, close to the town square where his father worked as a craftsman. Whenever young Saul helped at his father's shop, he was distracted by the lawyers arguing in the central hall and the priests parading into the **temple**. After work, Saul's dad joined his friends at the public **baths**. On special days, he went with his fellow citizens to the **theater** or **stadium** for athletic competitions. Saul was too young to join those events, so he and his friends exited the city gates and meandered through the cemetery.

This second paragraph refers to many civic structures from the ancient Greco-Roman city. These include tenement houses (**insulae**),[1] town square (**agora**), main hall (**basilica**), temple, baths, theater, stadium, city gates, and **necropolis**. These features of an ancient city are far less familiar to us today. Our modern cities are structured differently, so we don't intuitively understand the ancient city, especially the social functions and significance of its civic structures. This affects our reading of the NT and other early Christian texts, which were written by and to people well acquainted with the ancient city.

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul asks his readers two questions: "Do you not know that those who work in the temple service get their food from the temple?" (9:13 NRSVue), and then, "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize?" (9:24). These questions are obviously rhetorical. Paul's original audience in Corinth understood quite well how temples and stadiums functioned. They had witnessed temple sacrifices and attended athletic contests before. So, when writing to the Corinthians, Paul could safely assume a basic level of cultural knowledge about those public buildings. This, however, creates a problem for us modern readers—we do *not* know about ancient civic structures such as temples and stadiums. To Paul's rhetorical questions of "Do you not know . . . ?" we would probably reply, "Sorry, but I actually *don't* know those things! Can you explain?"

There is an obvious cultural gap between us and the ancient world. New Testament authors assumed that their readers were familiar with ancient civic structures. However, two thousand years later, we are not. So we must apply ourselves to better understand ancient cultural realities, such as the nature of cities and their structures, lest we make false assumptions and misread texts.

The design, architecture, and meaning of ancient cities differ from those of modern cities. For example, ancient cities did not have hospitals, churches, or schools; modern cities generally do not have temples, public baths, fountains, or defensive walls. Even those elements common in both ancient and modern

1. Words appearing in the glossary will be marked in bold on their first occurrence in the text. When the glossary term has an entire chapter dedicated to it, the first occurrence within that chapter will be in boldface.

cities—such as theaters, stadiums, libraries, prisons, cemeteries, homes, and roads—have notably different shapes and functions. For example, we could compare the ancient agora (or **forum**) to a modern shopping center, but the agora also had religious and political functions. Compared to urban environments today, life in the ancient city was quite different. Therefore, we must understand ancient civic institutions according to their own time and culture.

In recent decades especially, NT scholars have expounded on the geographical,[2] political,[3] and socio-cultural[4] backgrounds of early Christianity. However, the civic and architectural context of early Christians is hardly considered in interpretations of early Christian literature.[5] This book introduces the ancient city and its principal structures in order to promote a better understanding of the lives, texts, and theology of early Christians.

Early Christianity was more than theological ideas about God's kingdom, justification by faith, or eternal life. Christians were real people in real places doing real things. The earliest believers worked in agoras, washed in baths, and sat in prisons. Civic structures play a prominent role in the life and writings of early Christians. Consider a few examples:

- Jesus and Paul taught in an agora.
- On 120 occasions, NT authors use the word "temple."
- Early church leaders debated whether Christians should attend public baths.
- Christians were often incarcerated and wrote many letters from prison.
- Paul's letters often use athletic imagery from theaters and stadiums.
- The earliest NT manuscripts were transcribed in libraries.
- Early Christians gathered for worship at burial sites in necropolises.

2. E.g., Barry J. Beitzel, ed., *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018); Barry J. Beitzel, ed., *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts Through Revelation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019).

3. E.g., Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012); Najeeb T. Haddad, *Paul, Politics, and New Creation: Reconsidering Paul and Empire* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2023).

4. E.g., Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022).

5. E.g., the extensive article Ann C. Gunter et al., "Art and Architecture," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:401–61, focuses on ancient Near Eastern architecture and early Christian art but does not discuss Greco-Roman architecture. None of the IVP black dictionaries, including the *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, have an entry on "architecture" or related topics (except for "temple").

The meaning and significance of such actions were related to the places in which they occurred. Greco-Roman civic structures were not neutral spaces or merely stages for everyday life. The physical structures and their architecture carried meaning and shaped lives. Christians did certain things in certain places for certain reasons. The civic and architectural contexts matter.

In recent decades, the field of "material studies" or "materiality" has made an impact on historical and religious studies, including NT studies.[6] In this approach, scholars consider how material things, though inanimate and lifeless, possess a vibrancy and sense of power. For example, you act differently in a cemetery than you do in a mall. You speak differently in a library than you do in a sports arena. You experience different feelings when entering a cathedral than when dining in a café. Buildings influence our behavior, emotions, and thoughts. This is an intentional part of their design. Paul Goldberger, an accomplished architecture critic, notes, "The making of architecture is intimately connected to the knowledge that buildings instill within us emotional reactions. They can make us feel and they can also make us think."[7] Buildings affect individuals and societies.

A focus on materiality does not mean that structures possess magical powers to control people. However, it does acknowledge how humans are shaped and influenced by their environment. Material things like buildings are produced by society, but they also shape society as people interact with them. Winston Churchill, the polyglot statesman keen on the nuances of social power, explained, "There is no doubt whatever about the influence of architecture and structure upon human character and action. We make our buildings and afterwards they make us."[8] This is true in our modern world, and even more true about the ancient world, where public buildings were deeply imbued with meaning.

This book considers the role of public buildings, or civic structures, in Roman society so that modern readers can better understand the lives, literature, and theology of early Christians. Before discussing the specific structures and their biblical connections, the first chapter introduces the nature and meaning of cities in the Greco-Roman world.

6. For recent NT publications that attend to material culture, see Laura Salah Nasrallah, *Archaeology and the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. 34–39; Maik Patzelt, Jörg Rüpke, and Annette Weissenrieder, eds., *Prayer and the Ancient City: Influences of Urban Space* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021); Moyer V. Hubbard, "'The Presence of His Body Is Weak': A Materialist Remapping of the Complaint in Corinth," *CBQ* 85, no. 1 (2023): 110–30.

7. Paul Goldberger, *Why Architecture Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), x.

8. Address to the English Architectural Association, 1924.

Ancient Cities

Cities have existed since the dawn of human civilizations about ten thousand years ago. Greeks and Romans did not establish the first ancient cities, but they did drastically expand and redefine them.[9] Greco-Roman cities expressed political power, fostered communal identity, and generated economic growth in unprecedented ways. Without cities, the Greeks and the Romans could not have birthed the cultural achievements that shaped Western civilization. The importance of cities in Greek and Roman cultures can hardly be overestimated. Cities, as an ideal and as reality, are arguably *the* achievement of classical civilization.

A city is, simply put, a densely inhabited place. When a significant group of people resides in a built environment, that is a city. This concept involves two parts: a people and a place. Ancients understood these two aspects rather differently than modern urbanites, so they must be understood on their terms.

The most essential part of any city is the people. As the Greek historian Thucydides noted, "Men are the city" (*andres . . . polis*, 7.77.7). In the ancient world, a city was generally populated by hereditary groups of extended families. The civic population was a clan or ethnic group. The people were related to one another, either by blood or by a shared mythology. Cities had a tribal identity, so they were somewhat insular. Residents were hesitant to let foreigners live in their city, let alone own property. Guests, travelers, and merchants were permitted to visit, but they remained outsiders.

In antiquity, people did not merely reside in their city. They were *citizens* of their city. Civic membership entailed certain rights (i.e., land ownership, due process in the courts, political offices) and responsibilities (i.e., military service, civic contributions, political participation). In sum, the city was family and country, not just a place someone chose to live. Thus ancient peoples

9. The literature on ancient cities rivals the number of ancient cities. For their composition and significance, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian* (Oxford: Sandpiper Books, 1940); John Bryan Ward-Perkins, *Cities of Ancient Greece and Italy: Planning in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Braziller, 1974); E. J. Owens, *The City in the Greek and Roman World* (New York: Routledge, 1991); John E. Stambaugh, *The Ancient Roman City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); Charles Gates, *Ancient Cities: The Archaeology of Urban Life in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece and Rome*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011); Arjan Zuiderhoek, *The Ancient City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Fikret Yegül and Diane Favro, *Roman Architecture and Urbanism: From the Origins to Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Mantha Zarmakoupi, ed., *Looking at the City: Architectural and Archaeological Perspectives* (Athens: Melissa, 2023); John Ma, *Polis: A New History of the Ancient Greek City-State from the Early Iron Age to the End of Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024). For a recommended children's picture book, see David Macaulay, *City: A Story of Roman Planning and Construction* (New York: Houghton, 1974).

had a strong civic identity and took great pride in their hometown, as seen in Paul when he asserted, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city" (Acts 21:39; see also 22:3).

The people of every city desired, above all else, to be self-governed. This meant no other city would take their money or interfere in their affairs. A city with such freedom (Greek *eleuthera*; Latin *libertas*) could appoint its own magistrates, issue its own laws, and print its own coins. A city's independence was crucial, even defining, for the community.

The Roman Empire transformed the political landscape of Greek cities. They now gained their freedom through good relations with Rome, so politics and diplomacy became paramount. Roman emperors granted political autonomy and tax exemptions to loyal populations who paid homage to their rule. Therefore, cities went to great efforts to establish good relations with Rome. This involved sending diplomatic groups to Rome and building large monuments in their cities to honor the emperor.

In today's world, notions of ethnicity, patriotism, citizenship, political freedom, and diplomacy function at the nation-state level. For example, I identify as an American, am a citizen of the United States of America, and expect the US government to represent my interests. In the ancient world, however, these aspects of life occurred primarily within the city. The ancient city, in some ways, was more akin to a modern country than our concept of town. It was a person's homeland. Hence, the Greek word **polis** is often translated as "city-state."

The second aspect of an ancient city was its physical place. The citizen body developed, inhabited, and controlled a certain area. They had to live, work, and worship *somewhere*. That place was their "city."

The territory of an ancient city (Greek *polis*; Latin *civitas*) involved two parts: the urban core (Greek ***atsy***; Latin ***urbs***) and the surrounding countryside (Greek ***chōra***; Latin ***territorium***). The farmland around the city was considered part of the city's territory, and the people who worked the land were residents of the city. In modern English, the term "city" refers to the built-up portions with a dense population, distinct from the suburbs and rural countryside. In America, the name of a state and its capital are different. However, imagine if both had the same name, as if "Sacramento" referred to the central capital *and* the larger area under its jurisdiction. That was the nature of the ancient cities. For example, the designations "Athens" or "Pergamon" referred to the monumental center *and* the surrounding countryside.

In our understanding of the ancient city, we should not make a rigid distinction between the countryside and the urban center. There was significant interaction between the two spheres. Farmers visited the city to sell their produce, participate in civic assemblies, and work day jobs to supplement

their income. So even rural people would have visited the agoras, basilicas, and baths in the city. This means that nearly all early Christians would have been familiar with the major urban structures of a Greco-Roman city. Even Jesus's Jewish followers from rural Galilee would have encountered monumental civic structures in urban centers like Tiberius, Caesarea Philippi, and other cities of the Decapolis.

The heart of the ancient city was its urban center, the densely populated area with large buildings. Urban centers are important in all societies, but they were especially important for ancient Greece and Rome. Their cities followed a distinct and orderly urban plan, which was developed by a fifth-century BCE Greek philosopher from Miletus named Hippodamus.[10] Aristotle called him "the father of urban planning."[11] According to the "**Hippodamian** plan," straight streets should intersect at right angles to form a grid pattern (see map 1.1). The city was also divided into religious, commercial, and residential sections. Based on their public function, certain buildings were to be located in certain parts of the city. Wide streets facilitated the smooth flow of traffic between the main civic buildings. This urban design replicated Greek aesthetic ideals of order and harmony. Greco-Roman cities throughout the ancient Mediterranean followed this orthogonal urban plan.

Ancient Civic Structures

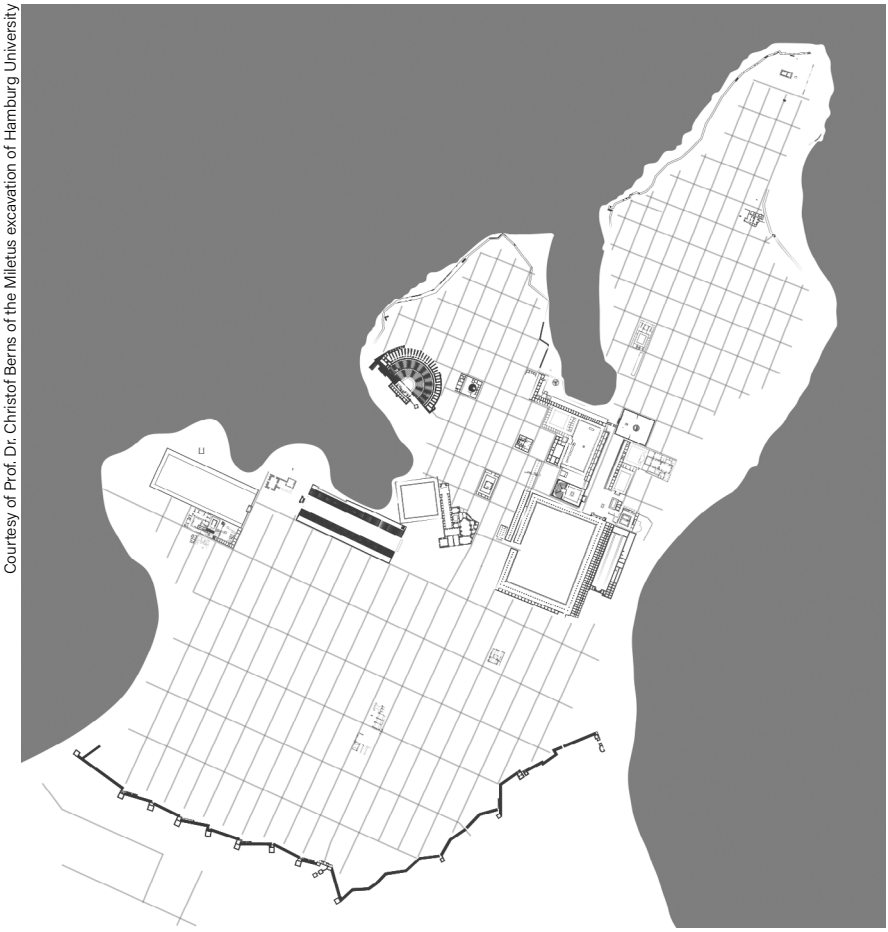
Greco-Roman cities consisted of large public buildings. In the words of classical historian Stephen Mitchell, "Architecture, and especially public architecture, was a supremely important component of Greco-Roman cities. Perhaps to a degree greater than any other urban settlements in history, the cities of the Roman Empire were defined and characterized by their public buildings."[12] As visitors to ancient cities observe, the impressive civic structures were obviously significant.

A comment from Pausanias, a second-century Greek geographer, reveals the defining importance of civic structures in the ancient city. When describing

10. Unless marked BCE, all dates refer to the Common/Christian Era (CE).

11. Aristotle, *Politics* 2.1267b. Hippodamus did theorize about the ideal arrangement of a city and is the first named town planner in history, having designed the cities of Miletus, Piraeus (Athens's harbor city), and perhaps Rhodes. However, he did not "invent" town planning. Earlier cities in Mesopotamia and Greece had been built according to a grid plan, and cities in the Indus River Civilization (ca. 2000 BCE) followed a plan. Cf. Alfred Burns, "Hippodamus and the Planned City," *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 25 (1976): 414–28; Owens, *City*, 51–58; Yegül and Favro, *Roman Architecture and Urbanism*, 614–16.

12. M. Waelkens and Stephen Mitchell, *Pisidian Antioch* (London: Classical Press of Wales, 1998), xiii. See also, Vitruvius, *On Architecture* 1.3.1; Rinse Willet and Jeroen Poblome, "Urbi et Orbi," in *Meanwhile in the Mountains: Sagalassos* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2019), 71–82.



Courtesy of Prof. Dr. Christof Berns of the Miletus excavation of Hamburg University

Map 1.1. City Plan of Ancient Miletus. The layout of Hippodamus's hometown closely followed a grid pattern, despite its location on an irregularly shaped peninsula. The city blocks were evenly measured and civic structures were set in the center of the city at the same angle.

a small city in Asia, he says, "Panopeus, a city of the Phocians, if one can give the name of 'city' [*polis*] to those who possess no government offices, no **gymnasium**, no theater, no market-place, no water descending to a fountain, but live in bare shelters just like mountain cabins, right on a ravine" (*Description of Greece* 10.4.1). Because the town of Panopeus had no monumentalized urban center, it could hardly be considered a proper city. In the ancient world, civic structures made the city.

The collection of large buildings did more than form the urban center and create spaces to inhabit. The civic structures conferred meaning, bestowed status, and declared truth. Architecture translated ideology into space.

Long before the Romans, the people of Egypt and Greece had developed the technology to erect large masonry structures, especially temples and palaces. In their post-and-**lintel** building technique, two upright columns supported a horizontal beam. This basic system permitted only a small space between the pillars, so their buildings were filled with uprights columns.

The Romans achieved two technological advancements that allowed them to span greater distances and create large interior spaces—concrete and arches.[13] By mixing burnt limestone (i.e., cement) with gravel and water, the Romans could produce concrete, which is basically a custom-shaped rock. This enabled large-scale building projects, such as the domed Pantheon and the underwater harbor at Caesarea Maritima.

The other key Roman innovation was the **arch**—a curved structure built from **voussoirs** (stones cut in the shape of pizza slices) that spans a distance. With this basic design, Romans constructed **triumphal arches** (a stand-alone monumental arch), bridges (a few arches spanning water), **aqueducts** (a series of arches supporting a water channel), **vaulted** ceilings (a wide arch atop two walls), and **domes** (a series of arches crossing one another). Arches could span great distances and carry great loads. Using concrete and arches, Romans built structures with unprecedented monumentality, many of which stand to this day.

Technological innovations enabled Romans to build monumental buildings, but there was another factor propelling the architectural extravagance—honor and glory. Civic structures were more than functional spaces where people could worship, shop, or bathe. Monumental architecture was an object of show. Romans constructed large, opulent buildings to impress the beholder. One architectural historian noted, "In the ancient world, buildings were not only a backdrop and setting for social interaction but also a form of social language. This language had meaning not just for the professional group who constructed those buildings, but for the whole population who experienced them."[14] By building extraordinary public structures, cities and elites could project power and enhance their status. In the grammar of Roman politics and society, monumentality spoke loud and clear.

13. For ancient technology, see Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, ed. Ingrid D. Rowland and Thomas Noble Howe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); John Gray Landels, *Engineering in the Ancient World*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); John Peter Oleson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Engineering and Technology in the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Andrew N. Sherwood et al., *Greek and Roman Technology: A Sourcebook of Translated Greek and Roman Texts*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2020).

14. Edmund Thomas, *Monumentality and the Roman Empire: Architecture in the Antonine Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

Roman buildings are notoriously large and impressive. The massive tombs, ornate temples, and expansive baths were physically imposing, even oversized. A common adjective for Greco-Roman architecture is "monumental"—great in size and stature.[15]

Civic structures also reflected the character of the community. In the ancient mindset, a beautiful cityscape expressed the virtuous qualities of its citizens. A city's honor depended in no small part on its civic monuments. In a speech lauding ancient Smyrna, the second-century orator Aelius Aristides speaks of civic structures as a source of great pride for the city.

> Everywhere [Smyrna] possesses greatness and harmony, and its magnitude adds to its beauty. . . . The adornments in it and surrounding it are similarly numerous and distinguished, and have left no others more desirable. The whole city is like an embroidered gown. . . . Everything as far as the seacoast is resplendent with gymnasiums, agoras, theatres, temple precincts, harbors, and natural and manmade beauties, competing with one another. . . . There are so many baths, that you would not know where to bathe. . . . As to all the theaters for contests and other displays, there is an indescribable abundance of them. (*Or.* 17.9–13; cf. 18.6)

Aristides highlighted the abundance and splendor of Smyrna's structures, a sign of harmony and order among the people. The cityscape reflected the Smyrnaeans' virtue. After his lengthy description of the physical city, Aristides concludes by asking, "What need is there to speak about the people?" (17.23). The question is clearly rhetorical: the monuments themselves testify to their admirable qualities.[16]

Public structures were also an expression of civic patriotism. Cities attempted to outbuild one another in their inter-civic competition for status and preeminence. In a famous example, the Asian cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamon competed fiercely for the privilege of building imperial temples honoring the Roman emperors (*neōkoroi*, the plural of ***neōkoros***).[17] Once these temples were erected, the cities would flaunt titles, such as "The first imperial-temple-city [*neōkoros*] of Pergamon," or "The twice imperial-temple-city of

15. For monumentality, see Thomas, *Monumentality and the Roman Empire*; Garrett Ryan, *Greek Cities and Roman Governors: Placing Power in Imperial Asia Minor* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

16. On the flip side, dilapidated civic structures indicated social decay and political dysfunction in a city. Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 7.38–39; 36.6–26) chided Greek communities for their unkempt cities, saying it reflected poorly on their political health.

17. S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Barbara Burrell, *Neokoroi: Greek Cities and Roman Emperors* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

Ephesus." Cities identified themselves by and prided themselves in their civic buildings. As the town clerk asked the crowds of Ephesus, "Who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper [*neōkoros*] of the great Artemis?" (Acts 19:35 NRSVue). Cities were known by their monumental buildings.

The driving force behind Roman monumental architecture was honor, the public recognition of a person's worth. Romans lived for honor and glory. They craved fame. The quest for status, represented through titles, crowns, and statues, lit their fire in life.[18] A common way to gain honor in Greco-Roman culture was through benefaction.[19] The rich sponsored public projects, and the communities that benefited esteemed the benefactor with honorary titles and public statues. By financing a public building, wealthy people converted their money into recognition and honor. Monumental building projects, in the words of Pliny the Younger, bestowed "eternal renown and glory" on the benefactor (*Ep.* 41.1). The most majestic monuments evoked a level of awe and admiration associated with the gods. The exceptional buildings seemed to defy nature and reflect superhuman powers, and so evoked divine-like honors for the benefactor.[20]

The benefactor's fame would live forever, both in memory and on the front of the building. Roman structures featured a prominent dedicatory inscription announcing who had built the structure. Carved into stone for perpetuity, the text ensured that future generations (including modern archaeologists!) would know the benefactor's name and munificence.

Monumental buildings legitimated the rule of political leaders. As Vitruvius, a first-century BCE architect close to Augustus, noted, "The majesty of the [Roman] Empire had found conspicuous proof in its public works"

18. Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); regarding honor in Roman politics, see J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

19. For ancient benefaction, see Claude Eilers, *Roman Patrons of Greek Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Arjan Zuiderhoek, *The Politics of Munificence in the Roman Empire: Citizens, Elites and Benefactors in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); John Nicols, *Civic Patronage in the Roman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Marc Domingo Gygax and Arjan Zuiderhoek, *Benefactors and the Polis: The Public Gift in the Greek Cities from the Homeric World to Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). For benefaction in New Testament, see Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Greco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1982); Alan B. Wheatley, *Patronage in Early Christianity: Its Use and Transformation from Jesus to Paul of Samosata* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); Jayson Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures: Biblical Models and Missional Implications* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019); deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*.

20. Janet DeLaine, "The Temple of Hadrian at Cyzicus and Roman Attitudes to Exceptional Construction," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 70 (2002): 205–30.

(*On Architecture* bk. 1, preface, §2; trans. Rowland and Howe). Civic architecture bolstered Rome's imperial claims. Temples, baths, and basilicas demonstrated Roman rule in distant territories. Buildings projected power. An important function of the Roman emperor included constructing (and restoring) buildings in the cities under his rule. This benevolent act secured his status and authority in distant provinces.[21] The structures declared, in no uncertain terms, "Our buildings are large, and we're in charge!" Monumental civic architecture communicated honor and power.

A monumental gateway in Ephesus illustrates the political meanings of Roman-era architecture (see fig. 1.1). Restored by archaeologists in the 1980s, the triumphal gate has three broad arches and a decorated upper section (**architrave**). The original structure was even more prominent—statues of the imperial family stood on top of the gate, and the donors were buried in prominent tombs on each side. Without any doors to actually keep people out, the gate was entirely symbolic. In 3 BCE, two freedmen from the imperial house, named Mazaeus and Mithridates, dedicated the monument to Caesar Augustus and his family. The former slaves had become prominent leaders in Ephesus thanks to their imperial connections. To publicly recognize their patron in Rome, they built the monumental gate.

The honorary inscription on the upper section was written in prominent Latin letters, with an abridged Greek version on the inset middle section. The formulaic inscription lauds Augustus with numerous honorary titles and identifies his family as the Ephesians' patrons (in case anyone in town forgot the social hierarchy!). The dedication reads:

> To the Emperor Caesar Augustus, son of God, the high priest, twelve times governor of Rome, twenty times the military general, and to Livia, wife of Caesar Augustus, and to Marc Agrippa and to Julia, daughter of Julius Caesar Augustus, our patrons, Mazaeus and Mithridates dedicate this arch. (*I.Eph.* 3006 AT)

The arch boldly asserts the supremacy of Rome and the unquestioned allegiance of the people in Ephesus. Such edifices realized and imposed Roman rule in cities throughout the Mediterranean.

21. For the process of imperial building projects outside Rome, see Ramsay MacMullen, "Roman Imperial Building in the Provinces," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 64 (1959): 207–35; Stephen Mitchell, "Imperial Building in the Eastern Roman Provinces," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 91 (1987): 333–65. Not every building project, of course, was imperial. Local governors and magistrates also financed public construction to advance their political agendas. Herod the Great, for example, was particularly adept at constructing monumental structures to legitimize his rule over Roman Palestine.

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Figure 1.1. The Mazaeus-Mithridates Monumental Gate in Ephesus, consisting of three arches with the middle one recessed. Each arch has an inscription above it.

In the 250 years from the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE) to the early third century, Roman cities flourished. A proliferation of benefaction fueled an unprecedented construction boom around the Mediterranean. This period of extraordinary civic growth coincided with the emergence and expansion of Christianity. Coincidently, the epicenter of the greatest building boom in Roman history, Asia Minor, was also the origin of many early Christian communities and texts. Thus, early Christians in the first and second centuries saw, visited, and perhaps even helped build the monumental civic structures that defined Greco-Roman cities. Those monuments, as this book explores, influenced their lives, theology, and texts.

Plan for This Book

This book examines the most important civic structures that marked the ancient city. Our tour begins at the city center and moves out. We begin with key buildings in the urban core (i.e., agora, temple, bath, and prison). Subsequent chapters investigate civic structures for large public gatherings (i.e., theater, **amphitheater**, stadium, and **circus**), a less-public building (i.e., the library), and a cultural space outside the city (i.e., the cemetery, or necropolis). Ancient cities, of course, consisted of more than just these structures. We will also

mention other civic buildings (e.g., gymnasiums, basilicas, amphitheaters, **hippodromes**, etc.) in related chapters along the way.[22] The conclusion, "The New City," reflects on how early Christians transformed the ancient city, both physically and conceptually.

(In this book about architecture and early Christianity, a chapter about church buildings is conspicuously absent. The reason is because dedicated churches were not built until the fourth century. For the first three hundred years of church history, Christians met in other spaces, such as homes, baths, and even cemeteries.)

Each chapter follows the same three-part format. The first section explains the form and function of the civic structure. I survey the general architectural shape but focus on the social importance of the space. How did ancient people use the space? What did it mean? I present the "ideal type" for each structure, offering a composite stereotype. For example, the upcoming section about ancient agoras describes what was generally true of most agoras, although every agora was unique.

To counterbalance the generalizing tendency, the second section of each chapter describes one specific example of that structure. This provides a concrete look at one particular instance of each item. The examples, all still extant and visitable, were selected for their historical importance and connection to early Christian history.

The third and final section of each chapter discusses early Christianity in light of ancient structures. I prioritize the NT but also include later Christian writings (e.g., the Apostolic Fathers, NT Apocrypha, martyr accounts, church fathers, church council canons, etc.). Christian texts sometimes refer to actual, physical ancient structures from the ancient world, such as the Ephesian theater in Acts 19:29. More often however, they use aspects of civic structures as metaphors to teach about God or the Christian life. An understanding of the cultural background enables us modern readers to grasp the rather ingenious and unexpected ways that early Christian authors communicated theological and pastoral concepts.

A proper understanding of Greco-Roman buildings illuminates both the texts and theology of early Christians. At one level, this book provides cultural background to better understand individual stories and passages in early Christian writings. To refer back to Paul's questions in 1 Corinthians 9, we can understand how ancient priests obtained their food in the temple and athletes

22. Because of limited space, several other elements of ancient cities (e.g., homes, fountains, **latrines**, healing centers, roads, walls, gates, and harbors) are not discussed in this book. The civic structures featured in this book were chosen because they had more socio-political meaning and appear often in early Christian literature.

won their prizes in stadiums. However, understanding the social nuances of civic structures also reveals the implicit theology of early Christians. Their encounter and engagement with public buildings offer a window into their mindset. Just as Romans expressed their political ideology through buildings, Christians expressed their theology in those same spaces. Therefore, this book explores how early Christians (re)interpreted, (re)adapted, and (re)purposed public spaces in accordance with their theological convictions about God and his purposes in the world. The physical spaces in Roman cities provide laboratories to see how Christians interacted with and contested prevailing thought systems.

The book is intended for a general audience and has a rather broad scope. Therefore, I have minimized technical discussions and academic debates. Two appendices define the main historical periods and architectural terms used throughout this book. As you've seen in this chapter, the first occurrence of a glossary term is in bold. To help readers encounter the ancient world directly, the voice of ancient authors has been prioritized. Rather than citing secondary sources individually, a footnote at the beginning of the section or paragraph lists relevant publications on the topic. So, without further ado, enjoy your journey through the ancient city and into the world of early Christianity!

TWO

AGORA

Our family used to live in a quaint Turkish town. The middle of town had a central plaza, a large open area about one block in size and surrounded by shops. Throughout the day, people frequented the area to run errands, grab a meal, or just sit under the trees. While learning Turkish, I spent many hours each day in the town plaza, since I could always find someone to talk with there.

The best restaurants were in the town plaza, so it remained full into the evening. Community events like fairs and concerts were hosted in the town plaza. In short, the community's civic life happened in the central plaza. Older people told me how the plaza used to be even more vibrant and vital. Before cars became prevalent, everyone lived within walking distance of it.

This concept of an open, multipurpose space in the center of town was a common feature of ancient Mediterranean cities. Considering that our Turkish town was millennia old, the current plaza probably follows the general shape of the ancient Greco-Roman town center.

The Ancient Town Square

The Greek word *agora* refers to an open area that served as the central public space of the Greek city.[1] The ancient agora was akin to a modern town square,

1. Paul Millet, "Encounters in the Agora," in *Kosmos: Essays in Order, Conflict and Community in Classical Athens*, ed. Paul Cartledge, Paul Millett, and Sitta von Reden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 203–28; Kostas Vlassopoulos, "Free Spaces: Identity, Experience and Democracy in Classical Athens," *Classical Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2007): 33–52; A. Giannikouri,

a multipurpose space in a city center lined with shops and administrative buildings and used for special performances on holidays. It was the heart of every community, the downtown area where civic life happened.

The term *agora* has several English glosses: "civic center," "public square," "public forum," and "plaza." The most common gloss for agora, especially in NT translations, is "market" or "marketplace." However, the town square served many noncommercial functions, so the word "marketplace" can be a misleading translation. Therefore, I prefer to use the original words *agora* (Greek) and *forum* (Latin). They are terms that help us to understand the architectural space on its own terms.

The Greek Agora

The agora was a quintessential part of Greek culture. Even King Cyrus of distant Persia knew this about Greek peoples, saying, "They have a place in the center of the city set aside for meeting together" (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.153).[2] He was referring to the peculiar Greek custom of "setting up agoras in their cities." The agora was so central to Greek life that it functioned as their way of telling time—the expression "when the agora is full" meant midmorning (ca. 10 a.m.), while "breaking up of the agora" meant the end of the morning (ca. 12 noon).

Ancient agoras did not have a sign over the entrance saying, "Welcome to the agora!" So archaeologists must recognize them by their standard typology—an open courtyard surrounded by a covered **colonnade** (a series of columns supporting a roof). The agora was located at the city center near the intersection of the main streets (or near the harbor in a coastal city). The central part of the agora was a large uncovered open space. Its floor was packed dirt or paved with large stone slabs (often white, so quite bright under the sun). A monumental statue of some god, goddess, or deified hero often stood at the center.

The open courtyard was enclosed by a long, covered porch with shops (see fig. 2.1). The **stoa** consisted of a row of equidistant columns facing the courtyard, a covered walkway about 10 ft (3 m) wide, then continuous rooms along the back side. The covered area provided a nice shelter from summer

ed., *The Agora in the Mediterranean: From Homeric to Roman Times* (Athens: Archaiologikó Institoúto Aigaiakón Spoudón, 2011); James F. D. Frakes, "*Fora*," in *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, ed. Roger Bradley Ulrich and Caroline K. Quenemoen (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 248–63; Christopher P. Dickenson, *On the Agora: The Evolution of a Public Space in Hellenistic and Roman Greece (c. 323 BC–267 AD)* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

2. Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, trans. Andrea L. Purvis (New York: Vintage Books, 2007).

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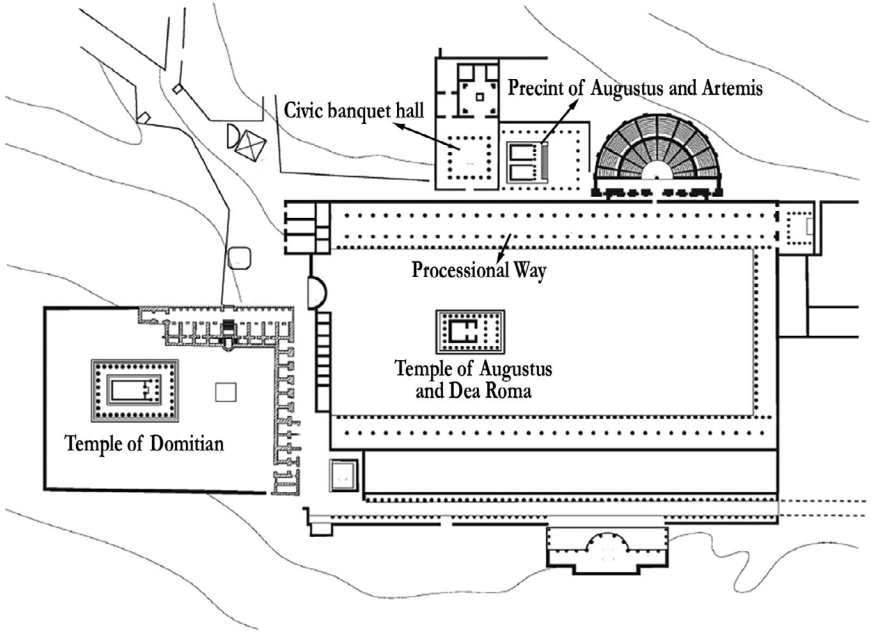
Figure 2.1. The northeast corner of the Roman-era agora in Perge, with the courtyard and its central monument to the right. The stoa (with gravel) originally had mosaic flooring and was covered with roofing above the columns. Entrances to the shops can be seen on the left and far end.

heat and winter rains. Stoas were usually on all four sides of the agora, but sometimes on just two or three sides. In large cities, the stoas around the agora were two rows deep and/or two stories tall.

The ideal agora was square, though some were rectangular. The exact shape depended on the city's topography and resources. Agoras built into hillsides were rectangular because a flat terrace had to be carved into the slope. The elongated agora in Assos, for example, measures 380 × 100 ft (115 × 30 m). Wealthy cities built massive agoras to display their prominence and accommodate their large population. The enormous agora in Pella, the Macedonian capital at the time of Alexander the Great, measured 656 × 600 ft (200 × 182 m). The lower, commercial agora in Ephesus was 360 ft (110 m) long on each side. Each agora differed in shape and size, but its layout followed the architectural principles of symmetry, proportionality, and alignment. The linear structures reflected ancient aesthetic ideals and social order.

The agora was the center of a community's religious, political, social, and commercial life. We can trace how these civic functions developed chronologically.

The earliest agoras in the archaic period (800–480 BCE) were open fields. Their shape was irregular because Greek cities had not yet adopted the grid plan. The agora space was used as a festival area, mostly staging grounds for



Map 2.1. The so-called State Agora in upper Ephesus is the large rectangle in the center. Religious structures in and around the agora are labeled.

sacred ceremonies. Boundary stones demarcated the agora space as a sacred precinct dedicated to the gods, like a temple or **sanctuary**. A city's **sacred way** (the processional route for religious parades) often ran through its agora. Temples honoring Zeus and Hermes were common in Greek agoras. Later Roman forums often had temples to Jupiter and Mercury, the Egyptian gods Isis and Sarapis, and the imperial cult.

The upper agora in Ephesus exemplifies the enduring religious function of ancient agoras. Though dubbed the "State Agora," the first-century CE public space was, in fact, a cult center dedicated to the goddess Artemis and the powers of Rome (see map 2.1). The agora space contained a central temple dedicated to the divine Caesar and *Dea Roma*, a massive imperial cult temple on the west side dedicated to Domitian and Titus, and a processional way through the basilica stoa along the northern edge for parades honoring Artemis. Behind the processional way was a sacred precinct (**temenos**) dedicated to Caesar Augustus and Artemis, and a civic hall (**prytaneion**) for religious banquets.[3] All these sacred monuments made Ephesus's upper agora a decidedly religious space.

3. Peter Scherrer, ed., *Ephesus: The New Guide* (Turkey: Ege Yayınları, 2000), 78–92; Dirk Steuernagel, "The Upper Agora at Ephesos: An Imperial Forum?," in *Religion in Ephesos Reconsidered*, ed. Daniel Schowalter et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 93–107.

The agora also served a community's political functions. A long-standing role of the central square was facilitating administrative, legislative, and judicial activities. The main organs of government in Greek cities resided in the agora. Political decisions and justice were dispensed in the sacred space because the gods were thought to enforce the rules and judgments. The civic decisions were made under the watch of the gods.

The political aspects of the Greek agora burgeoned during the classical era (480–330 BCE). Greek thinkers made the agora the center of the polis, both physically and conceptually. At the same time, democracy took root in Athens. This novel form of government required mass civic participation. All citizens (i.e., landowning men) gathered together in public to deliberate and decide matters of state. The agora thus housed the relevant institutions for the citizen body to properly govern, such as council houses (**bouleutērion**), mints, archives, and executive headquarters.

The Greeks took great pride in their pioneering democratic judicial system, and courts were fundamental to their democratic governance. The law courts were dedicated buildings along the agora's perimeter. In some instances, the term *agora* referred specifically to the courts. For example, in Acts 19:38, the secretary in Ephesus directs the crowds to take their matter to *agoraioi* (courts). Being "taken to the agora" meant being tried in court, especially in situations of mob justice.

Another important component of the judicial system was the ***bēma*** (Latin **rostrum**), a raised speaker's platform located in a central position of the agora.[4] The flat stone structure was about 10 ft (3 m) tall and often had a roof supported by columns. Speakers, including philosophers and teachers, used the **podium** as a stage to address crowds gathered in the agora. The chief purpose of the raised platform, however, was judicial and political. Ruling authorities, such as judges and emperors, held court while seated on the platform. The public platform functioned like a judge's bench or royal throne, a place of symbolic authority from which judgments were issued. Therefore, the terms *bēma* and *rostrum* are typically translated as "tribunal" or "judgment seat."

For the average person, the agora was the center of social life. The marketplace was "where men came together" (Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 51.2). If you wanted to find someone or do something, you went to the agora. There people sat around, chatted, and played board games. The adjective *agoraios* (literally, "belonging to the marketplace") refers to a "loafer" or "idler" (cf. Acts 17:5).

4. For the architecture and functions(s) of the *bēma*, see Dickenson, *On the Agora*, 157–70, 292–99, 308–17.

With so many people idling around, demagogues and rabble-rousers could (and did!) stir up mobs in the agora for their own gain.

The crowds of people at the agora created commercial opportunities. In a loose way, the ancient agora was akin to a modern farmer's market or bazaar, albeit in a monumental setting. Vendors set up leather-covered stalls around the agora to sell their goods and services. Merchants, craftsmen, leathermakers, bankers, farmers, and others sold their merchandise in the marketplace. As the agora developed, covered stoas around the perimeter came to house workshop stalls. Politically appointed "market overseers" (*agoranomoi*) and "weights and measures officials" (*metronomoi*) worked in the agora to regulate commerce to ensure fairness.

The agora was also a marketplace for the exchange of honor. As people interacted, the public venue served as a court of public reputation in which people claimed status for themselves. In an era long before "digital platforms," ancient people used the agora to gain followers and build their personal brand. To impress the crowds, wealthy people paraded with their entourages through the courtyard, and philosophers rhapsodized in the stoas. Even the common people competed for honor in the agora. Mundane interactions between a buyer and seller were approached as a competitive process. In this way, the ancient Greek agora was like the proverbial Turkish bazaar. (This is not a pejorative stereotype; I shop at a Turkish *pazar* every week and enjoy the negotiations!) Bargaining in the agora regulated social relationships and formed people's status. At multiple levels, the agora space functioned as the court of public reputation. These social dynamics bear upon Christian narratives set in the agora, as discussed below.

The agora was a proverbial melting pot. Unscheduled meetings and fortuitous encounters across social classes created serendipitous interactions between people of all classes, creating a shared culture.[5] The genteel Greek elites, however, did not appreciate mingling with lower-class market folk. Aristotle and others complained that the merchants had a corrupting effect on virtues. They resented the fact that commerce overshadowed the original religious and political functions of the agora (Aristotle, *Politics* 1330a35–1331b14; Plato, *Laws* 6.20.778c). In their mind, the space was intended to host the essential civic functions that defined the Greek polis, such as honoring the gods, debating ideas, and crafting legislation. The merchants who

5. There were, of course, exceptions. In Greek agoras, for example, youth and those accused of breaking a law (such as ill-treating his/her parents or abandoning his post in battle) were not permitted in the agora precinct. In the late second century, Christians in Lyon were excluded from the agora (Eusebius, *C.H.* 5.1.5), most likely the result of social pressures and not an official civic decree.

set up shops and hawked their goods in the crowded area had improperly commercialized the agora. In response, Greek elites proposed two separate agoras: one for the riffraff of the market and another more peaceful agora for governing magistrates. While segregated agoras did sometimes exist in larger cities (like Ephesus), most of the time merchants and magistrates shared the same agora. As a comedic poet noted, both groups marketed their goods in the same space.

> And in the same way everything is sold [in the agora]
> Together at Athens; figs and constables,
> Grapes, turnips, pears and apples, witnesses,
> Roses and medlars, cheesecakes, honeycombs,
> Vetches and law-suits; bee-strings of all kinds,
> And myrtle-berries, and lots for offices,
> Hyacinths, and lambs, and hour-glasses too,
> And laws and prosecutions. (Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* 14.640b–c)

Scholars debate whether the agora was primarily a religious space, political center, social hub, or commercial marketplace. The fact that each interpretation has its proponents indicates that the agora served many vital functions as a civic space.

The Roman Forum

After the classical era, Greek cities faced political and social changes. Hellenistic kingdoms (e.g., Seleucids, Ptolemies) and then the Roman Empire ruled over them. As a result, the agora acquired new forms and functions.[6] Town squares in the Roman era became increasingly monumental and concerned with appearances. Rome's economic prosperity allowed for new levels of architectural glory (or gaudiness, depending on your taste). Most notably, the open courtyard was filled with honorary statues and enclosed with colossal stoas. The Roman forum, even with its daily functions, became more like a public museum showcasing people's honor. Such changes are evident in the reconstructed forums in Corinth (1st cent. BCE–1st cent. CE), Thessalonica (2nd cent. CE), and Philippi (2nd cent. CE).

An important structure in the forums of Roman cities was the basilica. This large, multipurpose covered hall was the seat of political power. The

6. Vasilis Evangelidis, "Agoras and Fora: Developments in the Central Public Space of the Cities of Greece During the Roman Period," *Annual of the British School at Athens* 109 (2014): 335–56; Dickenson, *On the Agora*, 202–391.

rectangular building stood on one side of the forum. The central two rows of pillars (colonnades) were taller to raise the central part of the roof, creating a series of upper windows (**clerestory**) to light the interior. A semicircular platform on one end served as a court of justice. Magistrates sat there while holding court in the basilica.[7] Several other structures comprised the Roman forum: a subterranean prison (see chap. 5), a dignified senate house (curia), and the civic treasury located in public view for security and accountability purposes.

In the Roman imperial era (1st–3rd cents.), town squares around the Mediterranean started to imitate the legendary forum in Rome. They often contained a grand temple dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus (i.e., Capitolium, as on Capitoline Hill in Rome) and followed the decorative style of Augustus and his successors (i.e., **Corinthian**, the ornate floral design that symbolized ordered abundance). These new architectural elements visually and politically linked provincial towns with the imperial capital. Roman forums tended to be less democratic and public than the classical Greek agora. They symbolized and facilitated Roman rule.

Historians have generally interpreted the Roman-era changes to the agora (i.e., enclosed stoas, abundant statues, ornate appearances, political focus) as signs of cultural decline, as though Hellenistic and Roman rulers smothered the vibrant civic life of local Greek communities. However, the agora remained a vital public space and the heartbeat of ancient Greco-Roman cities throughout the Roman Empire, even while becoming monumentalized and politicized. Also, thanks to Hellenistic and Roman rulers, the agora concept was exported from the cities of southern Greece throughout the Mediterranean world. By the first century CE, the multifunctional town square was the center of everyday life in cities from Britain to Egypt.

The Athenian Agora

By most accounts, Athens was the birthplace of Western civilization. Athenians pioneered mass coinage, democratic government, and nearly every branch of philosophy. Athens was the epicenter of Greek cultural achievements, and the

7. Because basilicas were designed to hold large groups of people, they were preferred for public Christian worship in the fourth century as the Roman empire converted to Christianity en mass. For example, in 314 CE Constantine rededicated the basilica in Tyre as a church (cf. Eusebius, *C.H.* 10.3.) Today the term "basilica" generally refers to a large church (though technically it refers only to churches with a tall central nave flanked by lower side aisles). The original meaning of basilica in the Greco-Roman world, however, was a large administrative hall, a public courtroom where Roman magistrates adjudicated matters.

heart of Athens was its agora. In this town square, the Athenians practiced democracy, expanded their economic policies, and developed philosophy. Few archaeological sites can rival the importance of the agora in Athens. It was the prototypical ancient agora (see fig. 2.2 and map 2.2).[8]

Since 1931, archaeologists at the American School of Classical Studies have extensively excavated the thirty-acre site. After clearing away four hundred modern homes and over 33 ft (10 m) of dirt, the archaeologists made the site a public museum. This section describes the main structures of the Athenian agora in chronological order.

In the seventh century BCE, the agora was an irregularly shaped space centrally located at the intersection of three ancient roads. The main element of the entire agora is the Panathenaic Way. This broad street was the main thoroughfare of the city. More than one kilometer long, it ran from the main city gate (Diplyon), diagonally through the agora, and up to the famous **acropolis**. The road served as the processional route for the parade that led up to the Parthenon on the final day of Panathenaea (the Athenians' multi-day festival celebrating the goddess Athena). The unpaved road hosted many other events, such as chariot races, foot races, and military drills.

In the mid-500s BCE, the agora became public land with new monumental buildings. The foundational structure of the agora was the Altar to the Twelve Gods (522 BCE). The sacrificial table, enclosed by a low parapet stone wall, served as an altar asylum and was the physical center of Greece (**omphalos**) from which all distances were measured. Two other structures remain from the archaic period: the Royal Stoa (the headquarters for the ruler king and display place for Athens's inscribed law code) and a fountain house with terracotta pipes to supply fresh water to large crowds.

After the Persian destruction of Athens in 480 BCE, the agora was rebuilt in a manner that accommodated the city's democratic institutions. Important

8. The excavators have produced a wealth of scholarship, making the Athenian agora among the most documented archaeological sites in the world. Former site director, John M. Camp II, has written several overviews of the site: *The Athenian Agora: Excavations in the Heart of Classical Athens* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1986); *The Athenian Agora: Site Guide*, 5th ed. (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2010); "The Agora: Public Life and Administration," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Athens*, ed. Jenifer Neils and Dylan Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 86–97. Excavators of the Athenian agora have published over sixty volumes and 450 articles since 1953; many of them can be accessed at https://www.ascsa.edu.gr. The team has also produced a series of twenty-eight popular "Picture Books" on topics such as pots and pans, women, graffiti, shopping, and even dogs in the Athenian agora, available at https://www.ascsa.edu.gr/publications/browse-by-series/agora-picture-books. The ancient geographer Pausanias offers an extended eyewitness description of the Athenian agora in his *Description of Greece* 1.2–17; cf. Christopher P. Dickenson, "Pausanias and the 'Archaic Agora' at Athens," *Hesperia* 84, no. 4 (2015): 723–70.

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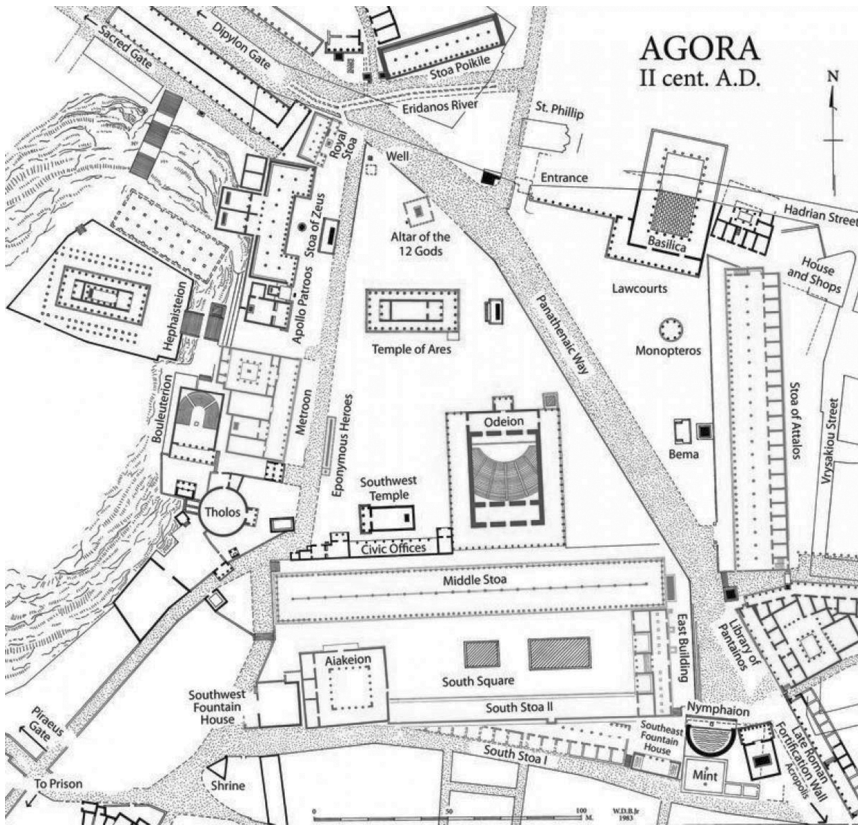
Figure 2.2. The Athenian agora, from the Hephaistheion, looking southeast, with the Stoa of Attalus on the left and the acropolis in the background.



American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations

Map 2.2. Plan of the Athenian agora around 150 CE.

buildings were added around the periphery of the open square. A round structure with a conical roof (**tholos**) headquartered the senate's executive committee (prytaneis). A group of fifty Athenian citizens (chosen each month by lot) ate there daily at public expense. Also, a new council chamber (bouleutērion) was built around 420 BCE. The five hundred-member senate council (**boulē**) met there every day to draft legislation to present to the assembly of all citizens (ecclēsia). Lastly, courtyards around the agora served as law courts that accommodated the juries of 501 Athenian citizens.

On the agora's north end, the famous Painted Stoa (460s BCE) housed legendary paintings of Athenian military victories. Built as a museum and popular hangout space, the covered area attracted large crowds and street entertainers. Around 300 BCE, the philosopher Zeno taught regularly from the Painted Stoa, so his followers were known as Stoics. The Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios and the South Stoa I were also constructed in the 400s BCE, creating a significant amount of covered space for gatherings around the agora.

On the west hill overlooking the agora stands the Hephaisteion. The fifth-century BCE Doric temple was the most lavish structure and remains the best preserved in the agora. The marble temple was dedicated to Athena and Hephaistos (the god of fire and metal workers). The building was creatively repurposed in later history—the Greek temple became a Christian church in the seventh century CE (which explains its state of preservation), and during the Greek War of Independence (1820s) Europeans who came and fought for Greece were buried there.

Even as Greece waned economically and politically after the classical period, Athens remained the educational and cultural center of Mediterranean cultures due to its association with legendary Greek philosophers. Even as late as the fourth century CE, the Cappadocian fathers Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus studied together at the Athenian agora. Because of its cultural cache, later Hellenistic and Roman rulers built new structures in the agora to burnish their image as intellectuals.

In the Hellenistic period, three more large stoas were constructed along the agora's perimeter. Most notably, King Attalus II of Pergamon (r. 159–138 BCE) sponsored the eponymous Stoa of Attalus. Measuring 377 × 66 ft (115 × 20 m), the two-story, double-colonnaded stoa had forty-two shops plus storage rooms. The monumental structure was part of Pergamon's ambition to become "The New Athens," a center of Greek culture, in the second century BCE. In the 1950s, the American School of Athens fully restored the Stoa of Attalus to serve as the site museum.

Never fond of life on the periphery, the Romans constructed two large structures in the center of the agora, much to the Athenians' chagrin. The

monuments transformed the agora into a museum of Roman politics. In 15 BCE, Augustus's son-in-law and general, Marcus Agrippa, built a large concert hall (**ōde[i]on**) known as the Agrippeion. The two-story space seated one thousand people and dominated the agora. The Romans also erected the temple of Ares near the center of the open square for the worship of deified emperors. Rather than build the temple from scratch, the Romans disassembled and transferred a fifth-century BCE temple from the Greek countryside. This method was more cost-effective and allowed the foreign rulers to present themselves as the protectors and heirs of classical Athens. In addition to the Agrippeion and temple of Ares, the Romans placed many honorary statues in the courtyard.

The Athenian agora was not a fixed size. Sometime in the first century BCE, city officials expanded the agora with a large square plot located 100 meters east of the old agora. This new area was the food market. In the time of Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus, leading Athenians petitioned the emperors for funds to enclose the food market with a monumental stoa (see fig. 2.3). The Roman emperors gladly obliged, for the new structure advertised their influence and authority over the famous city and also contained a precinct for emperor worship. Today, this Roman forum is a distinct tourist site, but originally the large commercial space was an extension of the ancient agora.

In the year 50/51 CE, the apostle Paul entered the famous agora of Athens, the intellectual and cultural center of the ancient world. When Paul came to

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Figure 2.3. The Roman forum in Athens, from the southwest corner looking down the south stoa. A church compound (upper left) occupies most of the original forum; the open grass area depicted represents about 40 percent of the original space.

the city, he was distressed to see that it was full of idols, so he argued "in the marketplace [*en tē agora*] every day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17). There is a question as to whether Paul spoke in the classical Greek agora or the nearby imperial Roman forum. New Testament scholars have usually suggested the latter, in large part because classical historians thought the Greek agora was overfilled with monuments and defunct by the early first century.[9] They assumed the old agora ceased to become a gathering place and was replaced by the new food market (i.e., Roman forum) decades before Paul. However, recent research suggests that Greek agoras remained active and important into the Roman occupation.[10] Even with Agrippa's large concert hall, over ten thousand people could still gather within eyesight of the *bēma* platform (located on the east side, in front of the Stoa of Attalus). Because the Greek agora was long associated with philosophers and teachers (akin to a modern university), it was a more suitable venue in Athens for Paul to dialogue and debate with others.

Early Christians in the Agora

As a normal part of life in ancient cities, the agora appears throughout the NT. Because the authors and their original audiences were familiar with the agora, Christian authors assumed a basic cultural knowledge about its form and function. This section examines four ways the agora appears in the NT: the agora in Jesus's teaching, Christians on trial in the agora, the "judgment seat" (*bēma*), and the verb "to buy, redeem" (*agorazō*).

The Agora in Jesus's Teachings

The agora was an important setting in Jesus's ministry and in his parables, especially in the Synoptic Gospels. For example, he told a parable about a landowner who needed workers, so he went to the agora and found day laborers standing idle. The laborers were waiting in the agora because that was where people searched for others. As one Roman noted, in the forum "you can easily find any type of fellow you want" (Plautus, *Curculio* 466–68).

At the beginning of Jesus's teaching on purity regulations (Mark 7:1–23), the author of Mark adds a parenthetical remark about Jewish customs for

9. John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 302–8, esp. 303; T. Leslie Shear Jr., "Athens: From City-State to Provincial Town," *Hesperia* 50, no. 4 (1981): 358–62, esp. 361.

10. Dickenson, *On the Agora*, 292–99; Cilliers Breytenbach and Elli Tzavella, *Early Christianity in Athens, Attica, and Adjacent Areas: From Paul to Justinian I (1st–6th Cent. AD)* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 55.

the readers—the Pharisees, and all the Jews, "do not eat anything from the market unless they wash" (vv. 3–4 NRSVue). Torah-observant Jews would have preferred to produce their own goods to ensure they were not defiled. However, when that was not possible, they bought goods in the agora. Those objects were potentially defiled because the Jewish buyer did not know their production history. So out of caution, they washed any food, drink, and utensils acquired from the agora. The agora was the common shopping area, even for Jews concerned with ritual purity.

Mark 6:56 summarizes Jesus's healing ministry: "Wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces (*agorai*) and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed" (NRSVue). People heard about Jesus's miraculous power and brought the sick to the local agoras hoping to encounter his presence. The comment presumes that communities of all sizes—villages, cities, and even farms!—had some sort of central town square. Galilean villages did not have monumental agoras with marble colonnades and civic halls. However, they did apparently have a public area in the city center where people gathered. These were likely open fields with packed dirt and some wooden stalls. Larger Galilean cities like Tiberius and Caesarea Philippi had monumental agoras. As Jesus itinerated in the region, he made regular use of the public open space for his ministry purposes.

On several occasions, Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees because they "love . . . to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces" (*en tais agorais*, Matt. 23:6–7; cf. Mark 12:38; Luke 11:43; 20:46). The Jewish religious leaders paraded through the agora, basking in the obsequious handshakes and honorary platitudes. These interactions deliberately occurred in the agora for all to see. As noted above, this was a common practice throughout the ancient world. Jesus critiqued the Jewish scribes for parlaying their position as teachers into social prestige. Their pompous behavior in the agora demonstrated their insincerity and, thus, the illegitimacy of their religious leadership.

Jesus's rebuke about flaunting oneself in the agora also served as a warning for his disciples. Perhaps to no one's surprise, later Christian leaders were not immune from such pompous behavior. Eusebius reported that Paul of Samasota, the prominent bishop of Antioch around 260 CE, "adorns himself with worldly honors and . . . struts about the marketplaces [*kata tas agoras*], reading or dictating letters as he strides in public surrounded by a large bodyguard" (Eusebius, *C.H.* 7.30.8). Such public behavior in the agora was a reason why church leaders condemned him as a heretic. They reasoned that "the faith is discredited and loathed due to his bloated conceit and pride."

Throughout history, pagan, Jewish, and Christian leaders were inclined to peacock through the agora.

In another teaching, Jesus told a short, enigmatic parable about children in the agora.

> [31]To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? [32]They are like children sitting in the marketplace [*en agora*] and calling to one another,
>
> "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
> we wailed, and you did not weep."
>
> [33]For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon"; [34]the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" [35]Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children. (Luke 7:31–35; cf. Matt. 11:16–19)

This parable has puzzled commentators. Who exactly are the children? And how does the comparison to them (vv. 31–32) relate to Jesus's explanation (vv. 33–34) and the wisdom saying (v. 35)? Fortunately, aspects of the ancient agora could clarify Jesus's teaching.[11] As noted above, the word *agora* frequently referred to a court, the judicial space within the town square. The parable's subjects were not playing but *sitting* in the agora, a verb often used of courts, councils, and assemblies. Their sitting does not imply idleness or inactivity but, rather, sitting *in judgment*. Moreover, they are not rambunctiously shouting at others; they are addressing them through a formal speech (*prosphōneō*; cf. Luke 23:20; Acts 21:40; 22:2). So the opening image in Jesus's parable is not that of idle kids yelling in public. Rather, the language evokes a picture of judges presiding in the courts and issuing a pronouncement, as was often done in the agora.

In this light, the parable functions as Jesus's rebuke of his opponents for their failure to properly evaluate John and himself. Though they held positions as agora judges, the religious leaders were, in fact, arbitrary and capricious in their evaluations of John and Jesus (v. 32). The vindication of God's true wisdom would expose their misinformed evaluations of John and Jesus (vv. 33–35). The parable's main point is that Jesus's opponents who sat in judgment in the agora courts and issued pronouncements regarding God's new

11. Wendy Cotter, "The Parable of the Children in the Market-Place, Q (Lk) 7:31–35: An Examination of the Parable's Image and Significance," *NovT* 29, no. 4 (1987): 289–304.