

Revelation 3:1-6

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LOCATION

The fifth letter of John to the Seven Churches was to the ancient and historic city of Sardis. As one of the oldest cities of Asia Minor, the city lay along a highway that stretched from the Persian city of Susa, following a parallel course to the Tigris River, passing through Cappadocia to Sardis. Located in the Hermus Valley on the banks of a southern tributary, the Pactolus and north of the range of the Tmolus Mountains. It is about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira and about 45 miles of Izmir (Smyrna).



The name Sardis is that of the stone, sardius (*Greek*: sardinos; carnelian, RSV, cp.Rev 4:3). The semi-precious stone is orange-brown but reflects deep red when light is passed through. It was an economic stronghold of the wool industry. The acropolis was built about 1500 feet above the plain on a ridge of the 5,800 foot high Mount Tmolus. The precipice was difficult to reach and was considered unassailable by an enemy. The lower city was more accessible. Today the site is a ruin, but nearby the small Turkish village bears the name Sart, and the memory of fabled characters such as Midas and King Croesus of Sardis live on.

HISTORY

Sardis was a place of importance from the Lydian Kingdom in the 13th century BC. The Lydian Kingdom made Sardis its capital as early as 700 B.C. The first king of the Mermnad Dynasty was Gyges (687-652 BC), credited with the invention of the first coined money. The earliest coins were made of electrum, an alloy of gold and silver. In excavations in the early 1980s, many were found in buildings relating to the Lydian period.

The last and most famous of the kings was the Lydian King Croesus (560-546 B.C.). He was said to have panned gold from the nearby river Pactolus, introduced coinage of pure gold and pure silver. Crucibles and a few gold objects have made conclusive evidence for the gold-refining process from the 6th century B.C.

Following the Lydian Kingdom, Persian domination began in 546 BC, when King Croesus and Sardis fell to Cyrus. Herodotus records the shock of the Lydian defeat, as they considered the city impregnable. According to the ancient historian, the Persian forces were in the valley below the citadel, when a Lydian soldier dropped his helmet over the city wall. He scaled down the rock to get it. A Mardian soldier called Hyeroeades watched carefully and when captured, revealed the city's vulnerability. They discovered a secret way into the city. The soldiers used the information to capture the city for Cyrus, and King Croesus was taken prisoner. At the end of the Susa Road, Sardis became the most important Persian city in Asia Minor.

With the decline of the Persians under the advancing Greeks, the city surrendered willingly to Alexander the Great in 334 BC. Sardis became the western administrative centre for the Seleucid Dynasty. One notable battle of the period was in 214 BC, when the city fell to Antiochus the Great through the use of the method employed by the Persians more than three centuries earlier.

Sardis came under Pergamene rule from 189 to 133 BC, and was passed into the hands of the Romans upon the death of Attalus II. Under Roman rule the city flourished until it was devastated by the great earthquake in 17 AD (called by Eusebius the greatest earthquake in human memory) and Tiberias assisted in the rebuilding of the city. Some scholars feel that because of this great indebtedness to Tiberius, the city gave itself to the cult of emperor-worship, largely abandoning its historic love affair with the Cybele cult. In 26 AD, Sardis lost the competition with Smyrna for the coveted permission to build a temple to the emperor.

Until the change in 17 AD, Sardis was a centre for the worship of Cybele. Nash provides us with a good summary of information about the Cult of Cybele: Cybele, also known as the Great Mother, was worshipped throughout much of the Hellenistic world. The cult of Cybele underwent a number of significant changes over a period of several hundred years. Cybele undoubtedly began as a goddess of nature; the early worship of her in Phrygia was not unlike that of Dionysus. But it went beyond the sexual orgies that were part of the primitive Dionysias cult, as the frenzied male worshippers of Cybele were led to castrate themselves. Following their act of self-mutilation, these followers of cybele became Galli, or eunuch-priests of the cult. From her beginnings as a Nature-goddess, Cybele eventually came to be viewed as

the Mother of all gods and the mistress of all life



Barclay points out that even on pagan lips, Sardis was a name of contempt. Its people were notoriously loose living, notoriously pleasure and luxury loving. Sardis was a city of the decadence. In the old days it had been a frontier town on the borders of Phrygia, but now it was a byword for slack and effeminate living. The most splendid temple in Sardis was the one devoted to Artemis, the later memory of the Cybele worship. It had apparently

undergone three specific phases of construction beginning in 3 BC, and ending at the earthquake of 17 AD. Coins also depict sanctuaries to Aphrodite Paphia.

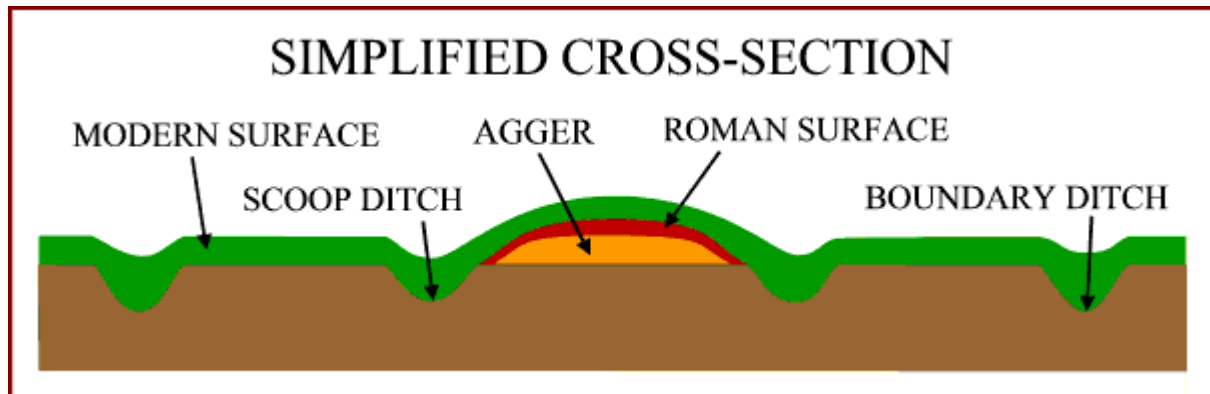
A great colonnaded marble road of 4600 feet in length divided the Roman city, whose population was estimated as large as 120,000 in the time of the Apostle John. A variety of inscriptions on extant statuary reveal the relationship with succeeding Emperors. Hadrian visited the city in 123 AD. Later, Emperor Diocletian reorganised Asia in (297 AD) and Sardis became capital of the revived district of Lydia. Melito, Bishop of Sardis, served in the second century, and some of his sermons have been preserved. Several representatives from Sardis attended the Councils of Nicaea (325), Ephesus (431), and the so-called Robber Council of Ephesus (449). Sardis was conquered by the Arabs in 716 AD, and eventually by the Ottoman Turks in the 14th century.

Temple of Artemis Artemis was the main goddess of the city and the temple dedicated to her in Sardis was one of the seven largest Greek temples (more than double the size of the Parthenon).



Artemis, known as Diana by the Romans, was the daughter of Zeus and twin of Apollo. She was the goddess of the hunt, the moon and fertility.

ROMAN ROAD CONSTRUCTION AND DIMENSIONS



A standard Roman road consists of a metalled surface (gravel or pebbles) on a solid foundation of earth or stone. There is an enduring myth that all Roman roads were paved but examples of paved roads in Britain (Blackstone Edge, the Dean Road) are highly exceptional and in most cases doubts have been cast on whether they are Roman at all.

The **Agger** is a well-drained base in the form of a bank of earth or other layered material dug out from **lateral ditches** or **quarry pits**. It can be up to 6ft (1.8m) high and 50ft (15m) wide or, at the other extreme, very slight or even non-existent with the road surface laid straight on the ground - this is especially true of minor roads. Local materials are used where possible - a layer of large stones may supplement or replace the agger if available.

The **road surface** itself consists of layers of finer material with a total thickness of between 2-3in (5-7.5cm) and 1-2ft (30-60cm). Additional layers are added by resurfacings. The width of the road is up to 30ft (9m) but more usually around 25ft (7.5m) with minor roads 15-18ft (4.5-5.5m) down to 10-12ft (3-3.5m).

Apart from the **scoop ditches**, the road might also be flanked by shallow **boundary ditches** 2-4ft (60cm-1.2m) wide. These may serve to define an official "road zone" especially in areas where the surrounding terrain (eg. woodland) offers the possibility of ambush. The distance between these ditches would seem to indicate two classes of road - 84ft (25.5m) and 62ft (19m). Where a road passed over unstable ground it might be supported on a wooden structure - at the marshy north end of Sutton Park this consists of a raft of gorse and brushwood.

Additional metalling is sometimes found in or beyond the side ditches. It may also occur on the **"berm"** between the principal metalling and side ditches of roads with very wide aggers. This may indicate alternative arrangements for different modes of transport or a slapdash response to wear-and-tear on the main carriageway.



The Romans in the times of the Book of the Revelation were sympathetic to the Jews in Sardis and helped to build a giant synagogue.



To the South of the palaestra (central square for sports) of the bath-gymnasium complex lies the Synagogue. It was built in 230-250 and renovated in the 4th century. It was in the form of a basilica, ending in an apse. In front of this one can still see a table like construction for offering, with eagles on its sides and two double-lions standing at their flanks. At the other end of the basilica are some raised pediments for religious purposes. The whole has been restored to an extent where it is hard to decide what's original. Other views shown on the next page.

Two further photographs indicating the sheer size of the Synagogue.



The photographs of the synagogue were produced by Dick Dosseman and used with permission. More of his work particularly on Turkey can be found at <http://members.chello.nl/dosseman/>

The photo below is just the façade of the Gymnasium



A large pool is behind the building and many hundreds of people would be able to bathe at the same time.

Bible Text

Rev 3:1

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: 'I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.'" Rev 3:1

This Church is one of the two which receives unmixed reproof. Smyrna and Philadelphia receive no blame; Sardis and Laodicea receive no praise.¹ The Spirits of God speak about the completeness (seven) of the Holy Spirit that broods over the Church. Christ reminds the Sardis Church that he has hold of the seven leaders of the Churches. A church can look good on the outside and a large congregation can be deceptive. There was a large Jewish community in Sardis and the usual a choice of foreign gods to worship. They got on so well with everyone that the distinctive

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Christian testimony had gone. Christian visitors must have been impressed with the liveliness of the church and wished theirs could be like Sardis.

The warning is that Christ knows what the spiritual life really is like. Do its leaders seek God constantly for guidance, protection, extending the Christian witness? Do they care for the poor and the sick? We should not judge a church by its professionalism of putting on services or its slick preaching. Rather go to the local social services and probation service and see if they know about this church and its mission. Go to the local schools to see if there is any impact from their ministry. So many Christians are easily satisfied by show and glamour. Christ pronounces them spiritually dead.

Rev 3:2

“Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.”

Many of the new translations replace the word ‘be watchful’ with ‘Wake up’. (ASV is as an example.) Interestingly the 1526 Tyndale version says ‘be awake’. The Christians of Sardis would remember the words ‘wake up’ because, as mentioned previously, their history showed twice they had been defeated by dilatory behaviour of its soldiers being off guard.

This Church as lively as visitors found it was spiritually asleep to the needs of the people although some were not ready to die spiritually. The most often text used in small gatherings is “for where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20). Often these groups fail the test of the previous verses where we are told that the Church was so moving in the purposes of God that they had power to bind things on earth and as such they were bound in heaven. This means that a church moving in the power and direction of the Holy Spirit and serving the purposes of God can expect a visitation of the Spirit of Christ. Sadly, Sardis was not in this position although a few were faithful to their calling. Their works were not found perfect before God.

For Sardis in particular their history should have warned them to be watchful. Twice they had been invaded from impregnable fortresses by laziness and poor watch keeping. Several times during the English civil war Cromwell led the Parliamentary army against strong points of a city believing them to be poorly guarded while he left the weak areas alone knowing that they had been fortified against attack. Why was he successful in this tactic? He understood how men thought. See also 1 Cor 10:12

For God to work among the Sardis Church he required a commitment to extending the Kingdom, for works of love and standing for the faith. There was no persecution of the Church and perhaps because everyone spoke well of them and they were fully integrated with its society they felt safe. The Church however, has been called to be in the world but not of it. Sardis did not appear to have a distinctive testimony. Too close to the worlds standards perhaps.

Rev 3:3

Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.

The Lord takes them back in time to when they were a new Church excited by what God was doing in their midst. Remembering is a powerful word. They were directed to look back on past blessing and when they saw God working in their midst. Their reaction to this word was not to give way to fruitless mourning but rather to lay themselves open to the impulses of higher desires and principles. They may have failed but the memory of their former joy should inspire them to renewed effort.

The Church must return to its source in each and every generation, to the fountain head of life and truth. If there is no response Christ will Himself come to them in a sudden and unexpected judgement. The reference here to the thief does not refer to the second coming of Christ, which is described in 1 Thess 5:2, but to a local limited coming in judgement to a congregation no longer worthy to bear His name. The parallel use of the symbol of the thief coming underlines the seriousness of the warning, as in all the warnings from God. It comes suddenly and with notice and when it does the name Icabod is written above it doors.

Repentance can lead to life from the dead. As with the Church in Ephesus the Lord told the same to the Church in Sardis. He would remove their lampstand. No Christian Church was evident ten years ago when last visited this city.!

Repentance is more than being sorry, it is rather a change of the mind. In turn this should lead to a change in life style both for the Church and its testimony and for the individual. Many Churches in our country(UK) have closed in the last 20-30 years. However, God is bringing new life into lots of existing Churches and creating new ones today.

Finally, the Church should never be complacent because just at the time we think he is not coming he does. If the strong man had known at what hour the thief was coming he would have guarded his house said Jesus.

Rev 3:4

“You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.”

The world and its values are so much round us in us today. Not only through the efforts of television, but in newspapers, magazines and the Internet, godless values are portrayed every day in that medium. Without thinking the world's values and schemes can creep into the Church itself.. The Hebrew thinking was that the white garment clothed the soul. Spotted garments meant a soiled soul. What is the reward for those who among church members keep the world out of their hearts and preserve their garments? They shall walk in white with Jesus Christ. What a reward for walking by faith with him first.

The Church at Sardis was surrounded by pagan worship and it is possible that the Christians not only kept quiet about this idolatry but gave it some sort of unofficial approval so as not to offend the people. Another cause for keeping quiet was the presence of a large Jewish population that held considerable power with the Roman authorities. They could make it very unpleasant for the Church should they do or say anything to which they did not agree. It is no different today. Governments pass legislation that offends the Christian way of life and the Church does nothing nor

says anything in case they lose their influence. By not making a stand against unrighteousness they have already made a decision to compromise with the worldly values of the time. This is always the dilemma for the Church. It does not make a stand on a particular issue and in time the people overall see for themselves that a mistake has been made and blame the Christians for not standing against such things or complain. Somehow the Church does not wish to be unpopular and in so doing loses the opportunity to be salt and light.

Rev 3:5

“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. “

When a person comes to faith in Christ a rather unique ceremony takes place in heaven. One of the interpretations of Jesus saying to Nicodemus is, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again (above), he cannot see the kingdom of God." The word 'again' *anæthen* is better translated 'above.' Taken together with the text taken from Heb 12:23 'to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect' we have a scene whereby a person comes to faith in Christ, is born from above and their names are recorded in a spiritual new birth register called the Book of Life. It is this entry that is preserved in the Revelation text. The Book of Life is quoted once in Philipians and six other times in Revelation. In almost every occasion it is given as a warning about being blocked out of the Book. See Phil 4:3, Rev. 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 15, 21:27, 22:19.

The other privilege extended to this over comer is for their name to be confessed before the Father. This confirms what Jesus said when on earth "Everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt 10:32).

Rev 3:6

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

See comments made in the Ephesus sermon notes.