

The Temple of Artemis



The temple of Artemis, mentioned in the New Testament, occupied a long held sacred site in Ephesus that mythological tradition goes as far back to the Amazons, a nation of Greek female warriors.

Mythological sources place the Amazons along the shores of the Black Sea.

Archeological evidence places human habitation as far back as 10th century B.C.

The Temple of Artemis was first constructed by the second half of the 8th century B.C. After its destruction by floods, a new temple was completed around the 6th century B.C. (550 B.C.) and was regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Antipater of Sidon, who compiled the list of Seven Wonders, describes the finished temple:

"I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the Hanging Gardens, and the Colossus of the Sun, and the huge labor of the High Pyramids, and the vast Tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, 'Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand'."

Destroyed by an arsonist in 356 B.C., Ephesians commenced a third temple in 323 B.C. even larger than the second temple. This temple is the one mentioned in the New Testament and would stand until its destruction in 268 A.D. It would not be rebuilt thereafter.



Because of its location to the Cayster River, Ephesus was an important commercial center, and in the 1st century B.C., it was the second largest city in the world with a population of 250,000. During the time of the apostles in 1st century A.D., it was a huge and thriving city. Only after its harbor silted up would Ephesus' importance as a commercial center decline.



The Ephesian goddess Artemis was a distinctive form of the Greek goddess. In Greek mythology as a daughter of Zeus and Leto, Artemis was a virgin huntress who was the goddess of the moon. She was the patron deity of wild animals, regulated the hunting activities and gave fertility to human beings.

The Greeks portrayed Artemis as a young attractive virgin wearing a short tunic and having her hair pulled back on her head.

In Ephesus, Artemis was portrayed as a mature woman with her robe draped in a way as to expose her multiple breasts. This symbolism represented fertility and nurture. Artemis was the chief deity of the city of Ephesus.

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By the 1st century A.D., temple activities would involve eunuch priests and virgin priestesses (pre-pubescent and adolescent girls) who conducted daily ceremonies caring for the deity and gifts brought by worshippers. An annual feast took place on May 25 (possibly celebrating the new moon or harvest) which involved a procession to the amphitheater for music, dancing, drama and animal sacrifices. Worshippers would usually carry miniature statues of the goddess in this procession.

When the Romans conquered the Greeks, they appropriated many of the Greeks' gods. A Roman goddess sharing many of the characteristics of Artemis was Diana which is referenced in the King James Version of the book of Acts. When these two pagan goddesses met, she would be identified with Artemis.



References:

1. Youngblood RF, Bruce FF and Harrison RK, eds., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc (1995).
2. "Temple of Artemis", from the website *Wikipedia*.