Local References in the Letter to Smyrna (Rv 2: 8–11), Part 1: Archaeological, Historical, Jewish and Religious Background.

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Relevance of Local References

Within the message to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, there are several “local references” to geographical, historical or cultural items. Evidence from archaeology, museum artifacts, inscriptions and numismatics (coins) helps illuminate the Biblical text and provides a basic historical context in which to understand the passages (Ramsay 1979; Hemer 1989; Scobie 1993: 616–17; Wood 1962:263–64; Porter 1987:143–49). Ramsay is particularly famous for his work in this regard and refers to the local references when he writes:

[T]he letters were written by one who was familiar with the situation, the character, the past history, the possibilities of future development, of those seven cities (1979: 28).

There is some debate over the relevance and validity of this line of inquiry. Court sees the implications of the local references theory as a kind of “environmental determinism” where the cultural setting is forced on the text to superimpose a particular meaning (1979:27). Barr attempts to demonstrate the pedagogical role of local references when he writes,

Boardwalk of Izmir (ancient Smyrna), the third largest city in Turkey. Until 1922 there was a large Greek Orthodox and Christian population in the city.
Harbor of Izmir (Smyrna) from Mt. Pagus, surrounded by the modern city. The second century agora (market) is on the left side of the photo. The city of Izmir is in the process of renovating access to the site and turning the ruins into an archaeological park.

[T]hese places and their associated ideas are not merely historical correlations, as Ramsay saw, but they are an oratorical device which would enable easy memorization of the order and scope of these letters (1986: 245–46, n. 9).

Hemer seeks to refine Ramsay’s approach, reconstructing the social history of the seven cities as “applicable to the original readers” (1989:210). Scobie answers those who doubt the importance of local reference when he argues that the proof of a few local references adds merit to this theory:

If only two or three local references can be convincingly demonstrated this would be sufficient to uphold the theory of local references; these would then greatly increase the possibility that at least some further such references exist (1993: 616–17).

He only discusses a few of the local references but recognizes that these references shed light on the nature of the letters as Christian prophetic oracles and on John’s relation to the local situations addressed (1993:624).

The fact that John would have had firsthand knowledge of the Roman world, especially of Asia Minor, is worth consideration when interpreting local references. The existence of local references as a useful background for the interpretation of these prophetic oracles (messages or letters to the seven churches) will be accepted as possible and demonstrated through focusing on several illustrations from the letter to Smyrna. More broadly, the evidence from Smyrna helps provide a better understanding of the cultural context for the early church.

The City of Smyrna

Smyrna (modern Izmir) is in western Turkey (Asia Minor) about 35 mi north of Ephesus. In antiquity, Smyrna, along with the other cities of the seven churches, formed a circular route. The history of Smyrna, one of the most important cities in Asia Minor, spans some 3000 years, from the tradition of her origins among the Amazons (ancient Hittites) until today. In Paul’s day it had a population of about 250,000. It was an important seaport with two harbors in ancient times; one could be closed for security, but had silted up by
the early 19th century. The harbors stimulated trade and commerce that developed Smyrna into a commercial metropolis. It was a beautiful city with purposely-symmetrical streets through which breezes from the Mediterranean cooled the citizens on hot summer nights.

Mt. Pagus, crown of Smyrna, as seen from the western Corinthian columns of the agora. The market place was rebuilt by Marcus Aurelius following its destruction by an earthquake in AD 178. Between 1932 and 1941 excavations were conducted by German and Turkish archaeologists. Presently the Turks are working here. The north and east sides were surrounded by porticoes with a large altar dedicated to Zeus in the center. Partial remains of a basilica (city hall) are also visible.

Archaeological Evidence

The local references may be illustrated by exploring the archaeology, geography, architecture, history, religions and gods of Smyrna. There are limitations in exploring the archaeological evidence from Smyrna, however, since much of it is obscured by modern construction. In addition, in 1922 a fire destroyed the Evangelical School, which contained a magnificent collection of manuscripts, inscriptions, and other antiquities and the finest library in Asia Minor (Cadoux 1938: xii).

In spite of these shortcomings, there are some second-century exposed ruins, artifacts in the Archaeological Museum of Izmir and a collection of coins from Smyrna in the British Museum that are useful in illuminating ancient Smyrna.

The archaeological evidence indicates that the church in Smyrna was situated in a culturally rich and diverse city which boasted running water, thriving markets, recreation facilities, and places of sports, entertainment and justice. Numerous temples portray a rich religious atmosphere which pervaded the life of the ancient city. Smyrna’s stadium became the setting for the martyrdom of Polycarp, Pionius, and others.

Agora

The agora dates from the Roman period of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180), who rebuilt it following an
earthquake in 178 (Bean 1966:52). Although it has no bearing on New Testament events (Pfeiffer 1966: 543), it does have relevance to the period of the early church. The state agora is differentiated from the commercial agora near the harbor. The state agora was an impressive complex occupying an area of ca. 260 x 390 ft (80 x 120 m). It had two-story colonnades divided into three sections, with two rows of Corinthian columns (Strabo, *Geogr.* 14.1.37; McDonagh 2001: 178, fig. 3). Akurgal adds:

There is also a magnificent vaulted basement beneath the north colonnade, still in splendid condition. The north aisle in the basement was composed of shops, which must have opened onto a street in Roman times. Court cases were heard in an exedra in the west part of the north colonnade. The stoa on the south side, not yet excavated, must also have had two stories with a nave and two aisles (1976: 848; cf. 1985: 122).

Between 1932 and 1941 German and Turkish archaeologists excavated the agora under the direction of Prof. Numan, Selahattin Kantar and F. Miltner (McDonagh 2001: 178). Since 1942 the site lay dormant until 2002 when excavation and restoration was resumed by the Izmir Archaeology Museum under the direction of the Museum’s director, Mehmet Taslialan. Excavations in the northern and western portions of the civic basilica have revealed many sculptures and architectural pieces. A portion of the basilica and part of the west stoa are being restored to a height of two stories (Taslialan 2004). According to Taslialan,

The inscriptions on stone provide information about civic life and the Roman government of the Province of Asia, and very numerous graffiti, preserved on the plaster which covers the north wall and many of the pillars of the lower story of the Basilica, constitute a Greek counterpart to the Latin graffiti of Pompeii, unique in the Roman East (2004).

Thomas Derwbear, a tablet expert, was brought in by Taslialan to help decipher the graffiti, tablets and inscriptions discovered in the Agora. Derwbear states that

Smyrnian youth ornamented the walls with everything about their daily life. Gladiator figures describing a fight with lions, comedians on stage, and other graffiti about sport and health were found (2003).

Recent excavations have revealed terra cotta water pipes underneath the basement. The basilica has been covered to protect the workers and the graffiti from the elements. According to Aristides, in the center of the agora, surrounded by colonnades, stood “a large altar dedicated to Zeus” (McDonagh 2001: 178). Statues of Demeter and Poseidon now in the Archaeological Museum are believed to have come from this altar. In addition, Demeter and Poseidon are depicted standing next to each other on a relief along with other gods (Bean 1966: 52). Akurgal postulates,
Basement of the agora (marketplace) in Smyrna. Notice the arched roof for underground shops.

Terra cotta water pipes under the pavement in the basement of the agora. These pipes supplied water to the shops in the marketplace.
It may well be that placing these deities side by side was intended to demonstrate that Smyrna at that time dominated commerce by both land and sea (1985: 848).

Basilica in the agora in Smyrna dating from the second century AD. Under the basilica were shops accessed by a staircase on the east side. Graffiti on the walls of the shops tell of daily life in the ancient city. Vermeule mentions that a statue of Trajan was also located in the agora (1968: 252).

The area of the agora altar was no doubt the place mentioned in the Martyrdom of Pionius, where Polemon was leading Pionius to make his sacrifice. “Come then to the market-place [agora]; there you will change your minds” (Mart. Pionii 3.3 [Musurillo 1972]). The agora is also accurately described in the Martyrdom of Pionius 3.4:

As they came into the forum, by the eastern Stoa and the double gate, all the forum and the upper storeys of the porches were crowded with Greeks, Jews, and women (Musurillo 1972).

On the second arch in the colonnade of the agora is a portrait of Faustina the Younger, wife of Marcus Aurelius, honoring her contribution to the rebuilding the agora following the AD 178 earthquake. An inscription on the entrance to the western stoa reads “The Pearl of Asia,” indicating the magnificence of the city.

Civic leaders have decided that these ruins deserve better preservation, so an ambitious plan has been undertaken to provide proper access for tourists and turn the ruins into an historic site (Geliyior 2005). Since the agora is the largest of its kind in the world, the finished site will be well worth visiting. This ambitious project, entitled “The Project of Conservation and Regeneration of Agora and its Surrounding,” is sponsored by the Izmir municipality. It will require the removal of shops, homes and a six-story parking garage to make way for the new Archaeology and History Park (Geliyior 2005).
Arch in the western stoa (portico) of the agora in Smyrna dating to the second century AD. At the top of the arch is a portrait of Faustina the Younger, so honored for financing the rebuilding of the city. Following the addition of shops in the north, the function changed from a trade agora to a commercial agora. The agora remained in use until the Byzantine period.

Aqueduct

Inscriptions describing repairs to the aqueduct by Proconsul L. Baebius Tullus between AD 102 and 112 have been found (Vermeule 1968: 252, 468; Cadoux 1938: 254). The ruins of the aqueduct built by Trajan’s father date back to AD 79–80 (Pfeiffer 1966: 543; Yamauchi 1980: 58; Vermeule 1968:252,468; Magie 1975: 578). These aqueducts still supply water to the city of Izmir and can be located along the road to Ephesus (McDonagh 2001: 179).

Faustina the Younger, wife of Marcus Aurelius. Faustina rebuilt the agora of Smyrna following its
Faustina the Younger, wife of Marcus Aurelius. Faustina rebuilt the agora of Smyrna following its destruction by an earthquake in AD 178. (second century AD, Istanbul Archaeology Museum)

Close-up of Faustina on the arch of the agora. The inscription “The Pearl of Asia” on the entrance of the western stoa is an indication of the magnificence of the city.

Gymnasium

The gymnasium of Smyrna is reported to be the most beautiful in Asia. Strabo mentions it in passing when he describes the location of the city “near the gymnasium” (Geogr. 14.1.37). Hadrian was a benefactor of Smyrna, according to his good friend Polemon, who had given “a million in one day” to Smyrna to build both a corn market and the gymnasium (Boeckh 1877: 3114; Vermeule 1968: 468; Magie 1975: 1513).

Stadium

The stadium was the location of the martyrdom of Pionius: “Hastily he went to the amphitheatre because of the zeal of his faith” (Mart. Pionii 21.1 [Musurillo 1972]).

Pausanias describes the splendor of the public games (Descr. 6.14.1). It was here that periodic festivals were held in honor of Augustus (Swete 1957: lxii) and games celebrated Olympia Hadriana (Vermeule 1968: 468). Two altars to Hadrian have been discovered, along with a statue of Hadrian as Olympian, near the hieron of Donysos at the foot of Mt. Pagus” (Vermeule 1968: 468).

About 30 to 40 years ago the stadium and the theater could still be seen, but today they are covered by the growing city of Izmir.

Theater

Claudius may have rebuilt or renovated the theater after an earthquake, but the evidence is based solely on the name Claudius in a doubtful and lost inscription (1968:468; cf. Magie 1975: 1401).

Bean states regarding the architecture of the theater, “the joggled arch technique was no doubt adopted as a precaution against further shocks” (1966: 51).

**Temples**

Swete tells us,

> If Smyrna did not claim, like Ephesus, a special cult, it could boast a number of temples, conspicuous among which were those of the Sipylene Cybele and the local Zeus (1957: lxi; cf. Akurgal 1976: 848; Cadoux 1938: 202).

The temples of Smyrna were beautifully decorated as is evident from Pliny’s reference to them as “consecrated mirrors” (*Nat. 10:33.9*).

Even though they were built from private revenue and managed by priests, the temples were seen as public buildings or, more correctly, the property of the gods. They were protected by local authorities that bore the name *Crown-Wearer*, assisted by an independent city priest (Cadoux 1938: 226 n. 10; Lafaye and Cagnat 1927: 1393a [AD 80]; 1386, 1420 [AD 200]; 1431, 1435, 1449 [AD 135]).

Pausanias also mentions the temple of Asclepius (*Descr. 2.36.9; 7.5.9*; cf. Tacitus *Ann. 3.63*). Other temples to the Neokorie and the temple of the Tyche are depicted on the coinage of Smyrna (Klose 1987: 38). In the account of the martyrdom of Pionius, Sabina and the others,

> throw themselves on the ground to avoid being dragged to the temple [*eidoleon*, a temple which houses an idol, as in 1 Cor 8:10] (*Mart. Pionii 15.7* [Musurillo 1972]).

The fact that there were so many temples situated in Smyrna would lend strength to the martyrdom prophecy given to the church (Rv 2:10). There would be a culture clash with the worshippers of these temples and, if their revenues were affected, as in the case of Demetrius the silversmith of Ephesus (Acts 19:23–29) and the owner of a fortune-telling slave girl in Philippi (Acts 16:16–24), then it would not be unrealistic to see a similar persecution at Smyrna. After all, the news about the impact of Paul’s preaching on the Artemis cult had extended throughout all Asia Minor (Acts 19:10, 27). It is also notable that the only two accounts of Christians being arrested in the book of Acts stem from the loss of revenue resulting from the life-changing effects of preaching the gospel. Since the persecution by the Jewish element in the early church was frequent, and also present in Smyrna (Rv 2:10), it would not be unreasonable to expect a similar reaction to the impact of the gospel on the cultic temple revenue.
Priest of the imperial cult who served in the temple. (Ephesus, second century AD, Izmir Archaeological Museum)
Cybele, the most widely worshipped goddess in the Hellenistic period. She was worshipped in Asia Minor from the Neolithic period. Cybele was the goddess of nature, representing fertility and motherhood. She was usually depicted with a high headdress, enthroned between lions or with lions on her lap, and holding a musical instrument such as a cymbal in her hand. (Istanbul Archaeological Museum)

Small statues and reliefs of the mother goddess Cybele. Her image frequently appeared on the coins of Smyrna. The worship of Cybele was introduced to Rome as Magna Mater (“great mother”) because the Romans believed that Aeneas, a member of the Trojan royal family, was their ancestor. (30 BC-AD 395, from various sites in western Anatolia, Istanbul Archaeological Museum)
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1 Photos are by the author, except where indicated.

2 For a detailed historical background of Smyrna one can consult the thorough works of Cadoux (1938: 23–170) and Cook (1963: 68–74); and a number of other helpful articles by such noted authorities on ancient Ionia as Ramsey (1979: 251–2; 1902: 553–56), Akurgal (1976: 848; 1985), Strahan (1919: 513–14), Arundell (1834) and Potter (1992: 6.73-75).

3 A place where youths met for exercise and discussion.

4 In 1881 Ramsay wrote a memoir on Smyrna in which he discussed the location of two temples, but he states that he never found time to publish it (1895: 441, n. 2).