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

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The city of Smyrna has had a long and illustrious history of Christian presence. Christian figures such as Clement of Rome (active AD 90–100) and Ignatius of Antioch (died AD 110) wrote letters to Smyrna; Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, was born in Smyrna; Polycarp and Pionius, bishops of Smyrna, were martyred here, just to mention a few. As a result, perhaps no other city has contributed so much to our understanding of the early church other than Rome and possibly Jerusalem. According to Charles, “the Church in Smyrna was not founded till 61–64 AD at earliest” (1963:1.xlviii; Polycarp To the Philippians 2). The majority of the information on the early church of Smyrna is derived from letters written by Ignatius to the church at Smyrna and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. He wrote them in Troas a few days after leaving Smyrna, on his way from Antioch to Rome. While the exact length of time Ignatius spent in Smyrna is not known, it was not a brief stay (Shepherd 1940:141–42). Devout Jews from the province of Asia were at the Pentecost feast in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit was poured out (Acts 2:9). Some of these may have come from Smyrna and taken the gospel back to their hometown. When Paul came to Ephesus in the early 50s, he or his associates may have instituted the church in Smyrna. Polycarp’s letter to the church at Philippi may indicate that the knowledge of Christ had not yet come to Smyrna when Paul in 62 wrote his letter to Philippians: “for we did not yet know him [Christ]”. Shepherd observed “of Smyrna we possess more information than of any other Christian church of the period, with the possible exception of the Roman church” (1940:141). The size of the congregation in Smyrna is also not known, but as Shepherd concludes,

the Christian population in Smyrna at the time of Ignatius’ visit was too numerous to be congregated in its entirety at any given assembly. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that it does not appear from our sources that the Christians had only one invariable place of meeting at regular, stated times (1940:148).

Perhaps they met in house churches of local believers, like Tavia and the widow Epitropos that Ignatius mentioned by name in his writings (Ignatius To the Smyrneans 12.2; Ignatius To Polycarp 8.2; Shepherd 1940:148).

Origin of the Name

The origin and meaning of the name Smyrna is concealed by ancient mythology and legends. There is also debate over the linguistic connection between Smyrna the city and smyrna (myrrh) the spice. J. Rendel Harris identifies Smyrna and Myra (Acts 27:5) with the spice (1926:330, 340). Harris argues that “the existence of a trade in spices and frankincense and myrrh between S. Arabia and the Mediterranean” (1926:340) led to the naming of Smyrna, Myra and Adramyttion after “the products which were the stock-in-trade of the first
settlers” (1926:330) during the pre-Hellenic era (Cadoux 1938:31, n. 2). This becomes a plausible theory given that western Asia Minor does not produce myrrh on its own and the common practice of colonists identifying the name of a place with either a product or import from their homeland. The ancient Semitic root for “myrrh” is Моск (Hebrew; LXX смурна), used 21 times in the OT denoting a sacred oil and perfume extracted from the gum in the bark of the Balsamodendron Myrrha tree or shrub found in Somaliland, Arabia and Ethiopia (van Beek 1960:71–72; Brown Driver and Briggs 2002: B5864.600; Sherwell-Cooper 1980:326; Brown 1985:294). Моск (Hebrew, myrrh) is derived from the root мар (Hebrew) meaning “to be bitter.” The physical taste is bitter thus leading to the employment of the term “bitter” (мorsk Hebrew) for its name (Michaelis 1968:457).
Mt. Pagus (Kadifakale), crown of Smyrna, as seen from the western Corinthian columns of the agora. The shape of Mt. Pagus in the background led Ramsay and others to suggest that the reference to a crown in Revelation was an allusion to the shape of this mountain overlooking ancient Smyrna. However, given the predominance of crown wreaths in ancient culture it is unlikely that this was the local reference.

Smyrna later developed into myrrh and is used three times in the NT excluding the name of the city. In Matthew 2:11 (LXX smurna) it was one of the expensive gifts brought to the infant Christ by the Magi. Again, at the close of Christ’s ministry, myrrh is used to mix with wine to hide the bitter taste (Mk 15:23, smurnidzô). Myrrh’s antiseptic properties were also used in embalming the body of Christ (Jn 19:39, smurnês; Liddell 2002:36626 n.p.; Thayer 2002:4835 n.p.). The use of myrrh (smurna Greek) in the NT connected with the humiliation and suffering of Christ is consistent with the theme of martyrdom. Hemer concludes that the symbolism of myrrh points to the suffering and death of Christ.

As it has been used in death and burial, in the expectation of an after-life, so Christ himself had died and lived again. The themes of suffering, death and resurrection pervade every verse of our letter (Hemer 1989:59).

The name of Smyrna is, therefore, indeed appropriate for a city which would come to know significant suffering.

Smyrna—First in Asia

Although Smyrna classifies herself on her coins as “First of Asia” (Smurnaiôn prótôn Asias [Greek]; Head 1964: nos. 405, 413–14), this honor was contested by Ephesus and Pergamum (Magie 1975:635–36). All three could be classified as first in some area. Pergamum classified herself as “First and Metropolis” and Ephesus called herself “First and Greatest Metropolis of Asia” (Cadoux1938:291), leaving Smyrna the honor of “First in Beauty and Size.” The
inscription “the pearl of Asia” still remains evident on the entrance to the western stoa of
the agora as an indication of the magnificence of the city. During the reign of Antoninus
Pius (AD 138–161) the enmity between Ephesus and Smyrna was addressed in a letter to the
Council and People of Ephesus in which the emperor urges the Ephesians to:

overlook the Smyrnians’ failure to refer to Ephesus in the proper manner. He
also admonished them, when addressing their rival, to use the titles which
Smyrna had the right to bear; for if they did so, it was hoped, the latter
“would in the future be willing to adopt a conciliatory attitude” (Magie
1975:636).

Under Antoninus’ successor Smyrna’s contest with Pergamum was successful and “the
city obtained a share in the position of primacy hitherto held by Ephesus” (Magie 1975:636).
Smyrna celebrated her fame by inscribing on some of her coins Smuraiôn

Gold Diadem or crown late fourth-early third century BC (Canakkale

próión Asias . . kallei kai megathi, “first of Asia in beauty and size (greatness)” as her claim to
full phrase as found in numerous inscriptions reads “first of Asia in beauty and size, and the
most brilliant, and Metropolis (Capital) of Asia, and thrice Temple-Warden (Neokoros Greek) of
the Augusti, according to the decrees of the most sacred Senate, and ornament of Ionia”
(Klose 1987:40; cf. Cadoux 1938:291; Magie 1975:637, 685; Boeckh 1877:3202; Lafaye and
Cagnat 1927:1420).

Even though this phrase does not surface on coinage until the reign of Caracalla (AD
211–217; Klose 1987:40) the sentiments were well entrenched in the Smyrnaean mind long
before they became impressed in currency. However, as Klose observes, “this title is
naturally too long for the coins and therefore never completely shown here, compellingly
even the individual titles will become shortened” (1987:40) Therefore, a partial or late
appearance on Smyrna’s coins does not indicate the inception of primacy but a formalizing
of a deep-rooted belief within the citizens of Smyrna.
While Smyrna claimed to be the “first in Asia” (Klose 1987:44), Christ declares that He is “the First and the Last (Rv 2:8),” providing a superior foundation for security. While affiliation with Smyrna’s prominence is not necessarily the primary purpose for John using “the First and the Last,” “first of Asia” was such a celebrated idea that it would later be discovered on Smyrna’s coinage (Magie 1975:636; Klose 1987:40; Cadoux 1938:291; Ramsay 1979:255; Head 1964:405, 413–34). This demonstrates that the primacy of Smyrna in Asia was already a deep-seated ideology among her citizens by the first century AD.

The Resurrection of Smyrna

The description of Christ continues with the phrase “Who died and came to life again” (Rv 2:8). This phrase refers back to 1:18 and the description of the power of “the Son of Man” over death. Commentators have identified several connections with the first century culture and the city of Smyrna around the idea of the resurrection. Allusions to the resurrection may be found in the first century symbolic use of the phoenix, the restoration of the city following its destruction by earthquake in AD 178 (Aristides, Works 2.18; 2.19), and the building of the second city by Lysimachus (Strabo, Geogr. 6:14.1.37).

The Tradition of the Phoenix

The tradition of the phoenix bird was legendary among classical writers and, by the first century, in Jewish apocalyptic literature (2 Enoch 12.1; 15.1; 19.3; 3 Baruch 6.11; 7.5; Sib. Or. 8.39). The phoenix was then adopted by some church fathers to illustrate the resurrection (1 Clem. 25; Tertullian, Res. 13). The legend was popular enough to travel through the centuries and leave an impression on the early church. To find Biblical justification for its use, the first century church fathers in correctly identify the Greek word \textit{phoinix} in Psalm 92:12 (LXX 91:12; \textit{phoinix} = palm tree) and Job 29:18 with the phoenix bird (Lightfoot 1988:43, n. 66). The legend is best described by Clement:

let us observe the remarkable sign which is seen in the regions of the East, that is, the vicinity of Arabia. There is a bird, which is named the phoenix. This bird, the only one of its species, lives for 500 years. When the time of its dissolution and death arrives, it makes for itself a coffinlike nest of frankincense and myrrh \textit{smurna} [Greek] and the other species, into which, its time being completed, it enters and dies. But as the flesh decays, a certain worm is born, which is nourished by the juices of the dead bird and eventually grows wings. Then when it has grown strong, it takes up the coffinlike nest containing the bones of its parent, and carrying them away, it makes its way from the country of Arabia to Egypt, to the city called Heliopolis. There, in broad daylight in the sight of all, it flies to the altar of the sun and deposits them there, and then it sets out on its return. The priests then examine the public records of the dates, and they find that it has come at the end of the 500th year (1 Clem. 25.1-5 [Lightfoot and Harmer 1989]).
Hemer confesses “its use in 1 Clement is rather puzzling, for it seems a very imperfect expression of the Christian idea” (1989:63–64). The popularity of the legend of the phoenix throughout antiquity may explain Clement and Tertullian’s inclination to use it to illustrate the resurrection.

Aristides makes the connection between the phoenix and Smyrna in a speech before P. Cluvius Baximus Paullinus of Smyrna March 3, AD 157, that exalts Smyrna’s beauty entitled the Smyrnaean Oration (Works 2.18–21; cf. Behr 1968:91). During his speech delivered to recognize the restoration of Smyrna, following the AD 178 earthquake, Aristides focuses on the theme of renewed life utilizing numerous resurrection terms. In his last speech Aristides compares the phoenix to Smyrna (Works 2.17.2; 2.18.9; 2.20.19), causing Hemer to observe that “the successive reincarnations of the bird are likened to the successive refoundations of the city of Theseus and Alexander” (1989:62–63; 230 n. 19).

As Aristides compares Smyrna with the phoenix to make a point of resurrection, so John uses a similar comparison with the resurrection of Christ and Smyrna. In addition, as Hemer points out, “most accounts of the phoenix, including that of Clement, emphasize the use of myrrh in its burial and reincarnation” (1 Clem. 25.2; Hemer 1989:64). Hemer draws a connection between myrrh and Christ’s burial when he writes that “later patristic interpreters read an allegory of the burial of Christ into the mention of myrrh in the Psalms and Canticles” (1989:231, n. 28). As mentioned earlier, myrrh was used in the humiliation and suffering of Christ, and for the Jew it may have had an indirect association for the preparation of the body as a prerequisite for the resurrection. Hemer speculates that Smyrnaeans may have known “the Gospel tradition in some of the several areas which linked myrrh with the resurrection of Jesus” (1989:65).
**Bronze Statue of a runner** wearing the laurel wreath (crown) awarded to the winner. Found in the Aegean Sea off the coast of Cyme. Second century AD Roman copy of a late Hellenistic statue (Izmir Archaeological Museum).

**The coin of a priest of the imperial cult** with seven imperial busts on a coin of Elagabalus (AD 218–222) from Tarsus, Cilicia (British Museum).

**The Resurrection of the City**
A second cultural allusion to the resurrection may be found in the civic death/rebirth phenomena in the phrase “died and came to life again” (Rv 2:8). Ramsay and Hemer both see in this phrase a connection with Smyrna’s history; however, they see the connection in varying degrees. Ramsay, following Strabo, holds that Smyrna lay in ruins for four centuries. Old Smyrna was destroyed in 600 BC by King Alyattes; then reduced from a city (polis Greek) to a village system, and it remained such for over 250 years (Herodotus, Hist. 1.16.1-2; Calder 1906:103; Aune 1997:160; Carroll 1946:8). Then Smyrna was resurrected from the dead to new life in the third century BC (Ramsay 1979:269–70; Hemer 1989:62–63; Barr 1986:245, n. 9).

The Jewish community, according to a second century inscription, contributed 10,000 denarii toward a project to enhance the beauty of the city (Ramsay 1979:272; 444, n.3; Kistemaker 2001:121; Barclay 1974:1.92). Smyrna’s primacy as a city was stimulated into a commercial metropolis by maritime trade that would increase the population in John’s day to as many as 250,000 residents (Barclay 1957:26; Kistemaker 2001:121). Calder could say as late as 1906 that Smyrna was “still one of the loveliest sights in the Levant” (1906:97). However, the fire of 1922 destroyed most of the dwellings in the Greek section. But it could not remove her beautiful setting on the water framed by Mt. Pagus.

According to Ramsay, “died and came to life again” perfectly describes Smyrna’s history so that “all Smyrnaean readers would at once appreciate the striking analogy to the early history of their own city which lies in that form of address” (1979:269). Hemer is more guarded; he calls Ramsay’s analysis “unnecessarily pedantic,” but still agrees in principle with his assessment (1989:61–62).

Moyise challenges the priority of the historical reference made by Ramsay and Hemer as “extremely unlikely,” and agrees that
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* (Greek, “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).

“Smyrna’s history is insufficient to explain the deliberate linking of a title for God (‘First and the Last’) and testimony to Christ’s death and resurrection (‘I was dead, and behold, I am alive forever and ever,’ Rv 1:18)” (1995:115.36). While there is reason to be cautious, there does appear to be sufficient historical evidence to argue that Smyrna would have been aware of her own historical rebirth leading to a deeper understanding of the “died and came to life again” phrase.

Christ’s resurrection was encouraging news for a church about to experience suffering. As Christ had been victorious over death, likewise Smyrnaeans could face suffering and martyrdom knowing that their faithfulness would be rewarded with the crown of life.

**Crown of Smyrna**

The crown was another common theme running through Smyrna’s history. Numerous connections to local reference have been identified by scholars that shed light on the meaning of the phrase “crown of life”.

Hemer observes,

the concept of a crown or wreath is in fact extraordinarily prominent in materials relating to Smyrna. Variations of the motif occur on every pre-Imperial coin listed in BMC (Nos. 1–119), and sometimes three times on the same coin (Nos. 35–46). Similar emblems are almost obsessively common
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).

throughout the abundant and otherwise more varied types of the Empire (1989:59–60).

Ramsay theorizes that Mt. Pagus was an “ideal acropolis, as well as a striking ornament to crown the beauty of the city” (1979:256; cf. Grant 1963:927; Horton 1953:101). He compares Smyrna to a flower garland “crown.”

The crown or garland was usually a circlet of flowers; and the mention of a crown immediately aroused in the ancient mind the thought of a flower. Crowns were worn chiefly in the worship of the gods. The worshipper was expected to have on his head a garland of the flowers or foliage sacred to the god whose rites he was performing... Thus the ideas of the flower and of the crown suggest in their turn the idea of the god with whose worship they were connected, i.e., the statue of the god. The tutelary deity of Smyrna was the Mother-goddess, Cybele; and when Aristides pictured Smyrna as a statue sitting with her feet on the sea, and her head rising to heaven and crowned with a circlet of beautiful buildings, he had in mind the patroness and guardian of the city, who was represented enthroned and wearing a crown of battlements and towers (1979:258).
Homonoia (Greek “political concord”) coin from Smyrna depicting three temples to Emperor Tiberius, the goddess Roma and the emperor Hadrian at Smyrna, minted by Caracalla (AD 211–217). Homonoia coins from Smyrna were prevalent during the reigns of Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Faustina, Caracalla, and Gordian (ca. AD 160–249). Smyrna had the closest homonoia relationship with Laodicea, Thyatira and Philadelphia (British Museum).

Ramsay speculates that the phrase “the crown of Smyrna” was familiar to the Smymaeans although his certainty that “the phrase arose from the appearance of the hill Pagos, with the stately public buildings on its rounded top and the city spreading out down its rounded sloping sides” (1979:256) is questionable.

As Philostratus points out, while Mt. Pagus may contribute to the popularity of the phrase, there were definitely other factors, which are more persuasive than the acropolis (Vita Apollonii 1:4.7). The beauty of the buildings and structures of the city are also highlighted by Aelius Aristides in his Orations when he “compares the city, as the ideal city on earth, to the crown of Ariadne shining in the heavenly constellation” (Aristides 1829:15, 20–22, 41; Ramsay 1979:257; Philostratus Vita Apollonii 1:4.7; 1:8.24).
Emperor Priests of the imperial cult with cords (crowns) around their heads indicating their status (left: first century AD, Ephesus Museum; right: Smyrna, second Century AD, British Museum).

Cybele was one of the most common images on the coins of Smyrna, together with the homonoia (Greek) coins where Smyrna’s goddess proudly wore her crown.

The priests of the imperial cultus wore their crowns (coronatus Greek) with the image of Caesar Augustus on them. The municipal officer or priests of this cult found in Smyrna, among other cities, was called stephanephoros (Greek, to wear a crown, Wis 4:2). Ramsay suggests that the terms coronatus and Stephanephoros should be understood relating to the same role as cultic priest (1895:2.56-57). Arundell points out that these Stephanephori, wore crowns of laurel during their public ceremonies and “attached to the temples of the emperors” (1834:2.375).

When the worship of the Emperors was instituted in Asian cities, it was modeled after the ancient religious institutions of the country, and thus bodies of Hymnodoi (Greek) formed part of the cultus of Pergamum, Ephesus, and Smyrna (Boeckh 1877:3160, 3170, 3148, 3348; Ramsay 1895:2.646). Ramsay observes that “the priest of the Emperor wore the crown, just as the priest at the hieron (Greek) of the great god did” (1895:2.631).

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