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Archaeology and Paul's Tour of Cyprus

BY MERRILL F. UNGER

Paul and Barnabas set sail for Cyprus from Antioch's port Seleucia Pieria in the year A. D. 45. It is highly probable that the two pioneer missionaries started at the commencement of the navigation season (the first week in March) since their destination was the 130-mile trip southwest to Salamis on the east coast of the island. Had they set out later the westerly winds which blow throughout spring and summer would have compelled them to resort to a circuitous course skirting the Cilician coast and then, with the aid of land breezes and ocean currents, to head south to the north coast of the island.

Cyprus, the third largest island in the Mediterranean, about 148 miles long and from fifteen to forty miles wide, was the fatherland of Barnabas. Its principal physical features are a mountain range along a large part of the northern coast and a parallel range occupying a considerable portion of the south, with a broad tract of plain, known as the Mesaoria between, extending on either end to the sea. As a native, Barnabas knew the island well, and doubtless his love for his homeland was one of the factors in deciding to head in that direction. He was still the leader and desired his native country and his relatives and friends there to hear the gospel.

In choosing Cyprus as the starting point of their missionary endeavors Paul and Barnabas (with John Mark, the author of Mark's Gospel, as helper) were entering a country with a long pagan cultural history. The island first appears in history in the fifteenth century B. C. when it was listed among the conquests of the great Thutmose III of Egypt.¹ By the twelfth century B. C. Phoenician colonists established themselves in the land, introducing their art and their religion in the form of Astarte. When Greek colonists followed, the licentious cult passed into the worship of Aphrodite, who spe-

Editor's Note: This article is the first in a series of three on the general subject, "Archaeology and the Cities of Paul's First Missionary Journey."

¹James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (1906-07), sections 493, 511 (*Isy* is Cyprus).

cialized in sex and war, and whose temples were places of legalized vice in the form of sacred prostitution.

In the heyday of Assyrian power Cyprus was under the rule of "the giant of the Semites" as Assyria was called. In 550 B. C. it once more reverted to Egypt, then came under Cambyses II in 525 B. C. and annexed to the Persian Empire. Under Ptolemy Soter it again reverted to Egypt as a dependency toward the end of the fourth century B. C. In this condition it remained till it was constituted a Roman Province in 57 B. C.²

1. *Christianity comes to Salamis.* The missionaries landed in the fine harbor of the largest city on the island at that period. Salamis was situated on the fringe of the fertile plain, the Mesaoria, opening up to the interior and giving access to the western part of the country. The city was some three miles distant from present-day Famagusta, but today its harbor has become filled with silt. Of its ancient remains a large aqueduct is extant, sufficient to supply a city of 100,000 people. At the southern end of the spacious limestone forum was a Temple of Olympian Zeus.

Large numbers of Jews resided in Salamis as well as in all the cities of Cyprus, especially after Herod the Great leased the copper mines from Augustus.³ This situation is reflected in Luke's brief notation of Paul and Barnabas' ministry in Salamis: "And when they were at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews . . ." (Acts 13:5). So numerous was the Jewish population that a number of synagogues existed in the city.

The success of the gospel witness in Salamis is not indicated by Luke. Christianity, however, took hold in the island. Barnabas is traditionally claimed to have suffered martyrdom at Salamis and a church memorializing this event was built there. At the Council of Nicaea in A. D. 325 three bishops were represented from Cyprus, demonstrating that a strong church was established on the island.

2. *Gospel progress at the pagan center of Paphos.* Quitting

²*Encyclopaedia Americana* (1951), VIII, 369-70.

³Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVI, 129. "The name Cyprus is derived from *cuprum*, Latin for copper." Olaf Moe, *The Apostle Paul*, translated by L. A. Vigness (1950), p. 196.

Salamis, the missionaries are said to have "gone through the whole island unto Paphos . . ." (Acts 13:6). Since Paphos was located on the western coast, the journey involved traversing the entire island. Three routes were open. The northern route by a road along the coast, a southern route through the cities of Citium and Amathus or the central route through the east-west plain (the Mesaoria) to Soli on the northwestern coast, where American engineers have rediscovered and reopened ancient copper mines that made Cyprus famous in antiquity.⁴ From Soli the coast road led southwest to Paphos.

Although the Cyprus campaign began in Salamis, the largest city, it was soon shifted to Paphos (present-day Baffo) near modern Ktima on the western shore of the island, a much more famous town in antiquity for political and religious reasons. Favored by Rome, doubtless because of its fame as a cultic center, it became the governmental capital of the Roman province of Cyprus and the residence of the proconsul, who had the rank of a praetor.⁵

Augustus rebuilt the city a short distance from its original site after it had been levelled by an earthquake. This was New Paphos, officially designated Sebaste.⁶ It appears in a third-century inscription under the appellation *Sebaste Claudia Flavia Paphos*, a holy city and mecca of the Cyprian states. By Jerome's time, it lay in ruins.⁷

Among the earthquake-ridden ruins of Old Paphos, less than seven miles to the southeast, was the ancient temple of Aphrodite dating to pre-Hellenic times. It was still very renowned when Paul and Barnabas came to New Paphos with the purifying message of God's grace. Pagans from all over Cyprus as well as from outside the island flocked to this cultic mecca to honor the goddess of love and reproduction with sensuous and immoral rites. Tacitus recounts the visit of Titus to

⁴Edgar J. Goodspeed, *Paul* (1947), p. 40. Cyprus does not appear to have been densely populated. Pliny lists only fifteen centers of population (oppida) (*Natural History* V, 35; cf. 31).

⁵Dion Cassius LIII, 12, 7:13:3; 15. LIV, 4, 1, sect. 324.

⁶Dion Cassius LIV, 23, 7.

⁷*Vita Sancti Hilarionis*, 17 in Migne, *Patres Latini* 23, 52.

this temple during the Jewish war and comments particularly on the image of the goddess housed there.⁸

Providentially the gospel was to win a notable trophy in pagan Paphos, but not without running into head-on collision with the demon-energized religious forces entrenched there. Sergius Paulus, the proconsul, like many officials in the ancient world—Babylonian, Assyrian, Chaldean, Persian, Greek and Roman—had a magician or diviner attached to his establishment.⁹ In this instance, he was not a pagan but a Jewish occultist, who had two names, Bar-Jesus, his Jewish patronymic, and "Elymas," an appellative name or title, specifying his pretensions to wisdom and supernatural powers. Luke interprets the appellative as meaning "the magician" (*homagos*) in Acts 13:8. It is derived either, as is commonly thought, from the Arabic *alimun* ("wise," "learned"), or according to a more plausible form the Aramaic *alima*, "powerful."¹⁰

The sinister character of Elymas is disclosed when he "withstood" the missionaries, "endeavoring to turn aside the proconsul from the faith" (Acts 13:8), as well as Paul's scathing denunciation of him and his work (Acts 13:9-11). Whereas the fate of Elymas is not narrated, except the temporary blindness that befell him, the proconsul was apparently genuinely converted to Christianity. His position as a patrician and a high official of the Roman Empire were not impediments to embracing the faith as it was not at this time (A.D. 45) material whether a provincial magistrate became Christian, was initiated into the mysteries of Isis, or espoused a Pythagorean sect. Christianity had not yet become a *religio illicita*.

3. *Paphos and the question of the proconsulship.* The author of the book of Acts indicates that the official designation of Sergius Paulus was that of "proconsul" (Acts 13:7). It was once claimed that Luke blundered in employing this term

⁸*Historiae*, II, 2-3.

⁹For a discussion of the demonic forces inspiring such professional occultists, see Merrill F. Unger, *Biblical Demonology* (3rd edition, 1955), pp. 107-42.

¹⁰Franz Delitzsch, *Zeitschrift fuer die Lutherische Theologie*, p. 7. Others connect with the Semitic root 'alam "to bind" referring to magical powers over the occult (Giuseppe Riccotti, *Paul The Apostle*, trans. by A. I. Zizzamia (1953), p. 254, n. 6).

(*anthupaton*) instead of "propraetor" on the ground that Cyprus was an imperial province.¹¹ So it was, but in 22 B.C. it had become a senatorial province. At Soli, a city on the northwestern coast of Cyprus, a Greek inscription was found which contains the phrase "under Paulus the proconsul." The inscription is dated in the thirteenth year of Claudius (A.D. 52-53) and without any reasonable doubt refers to the Sergius Paulus whom Paul introduced to Christianity.¹²

The proconsul is also presented by Luke as a "man of understanding" (Acts 13:7). Pliny the Elder makes mention of a Sergius Paulus, possibly the same person, who is cited among the authors used by him in the writing of his history, and well agrees with the representation in Acts.¹³ As a patrician of culture and intellectual acumen, Sergius Paulus had leisure to gather around himself at the governor's mansion in quiet Paphos a coterie of magicians, astrologers, and occultists of the day. His inquiring mind made these learned men of the day welcome, since they enjoyed much prestige in that age, as numerous Roman authors attest. The same spirit of open-mindedness made Paul, Barnabas, and young John Mark welcome to his circle. However, the gospel which the proconsul was to hear from their lips was a harbinger of the fact that although "not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called" (1 Cor. 1:26), yet *some* are. Sergius Paulus was among the first, and to mark this signal attestation of his call and harbinger of success among the Gentiles, the apostle abandoned his purely Jewish name Saul for his un-Jewish name Paul, and thenceforth becomes the leader. No longer is the designation "Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 13:2) but "Paul and his company" (Acts 13:13).

¹¹Cf. A. T. Robertson, *Luke The Historian in the Light of Research* (1930), p. 182. Riccotti, *op. cit.*, p. 252, n. 2.

¹²This important monument was discovered and published by the American consul on Cyprus. L. Palma di Cesnola, cf. *Cyprus, Its Ancient Cities, Tombs and Temples* (1877), p. 425. D. H. Hogarth, *Devia Cypria*, pp. 114-15. For Luke's accuracy in the intricate detail involved in distinguishing Roman provinces in general see A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, 180-82.

¹³*Natural History* II, 113, and beginning of Book XVIII. A Latin inscription (C. I. L. vol. VI, no. 31545) mentions a Sergius Paulus, who may be the Cyprian proconsul. Cf. Edgar Goodspeed, *op. cit.*, p. 228.