

# COLOSSAE

## The Buried City

by Peter E. Lewis

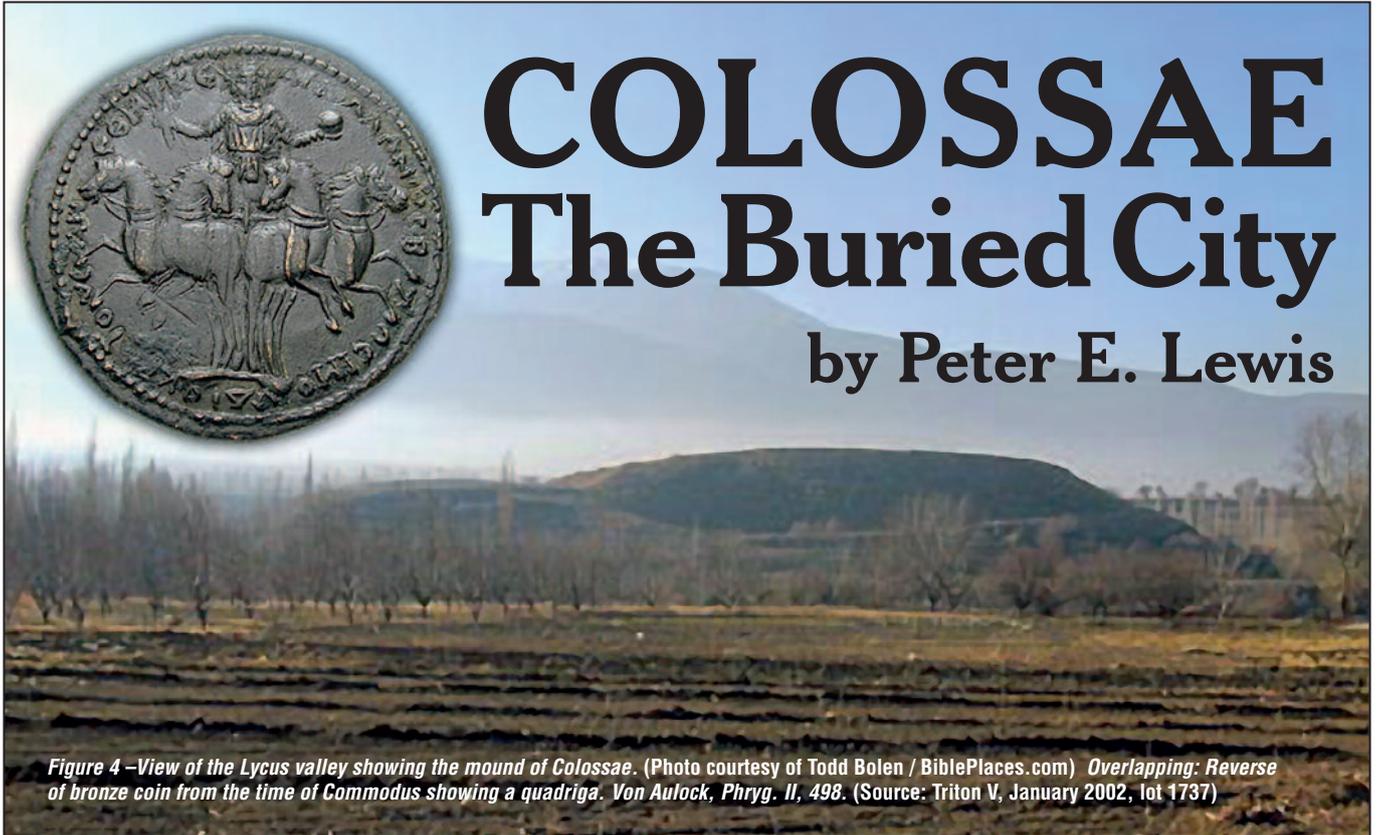


Figure 4 –View of the Lycus valley showing the mound of Colossae. (Photo courtesy of Todd Bolen / BiblePlaces.com) Overlapping: Reverse of bronze coin from the time of Commodus showing a quadriga. Von Aulock, Phryg. II, 498. (Source: Triton V, January 2002, lot 1737)

**C**OLOSSAE is an ancient city waiting to be unearthed by archaeologists, and it is not just any old city but the city to which Saint Paul wrote one of his most inspiring letters. Who knows what wonders will be revealed and how our knowledge of early Christianity will be increased? Although Colossae is buried, the coins that were minted there are known by numismatists and give us an insight into the life of the city.

As a general principle, if a city issued a coin featuring a particular god or goddess that deity would have been worshipped in the city and there would have been a temple or shrine to that deity in the city. On the coins of Colossae several deities are shown, and the archaeologists will be expecting to find evidence of their cults when they begin excavating the site. Most of the coins that the archaeologists will find, however, will be coins that were not minted in the city but circulated widely in the region. In fact, of the two coins found so far just lying on the surface one was a billon antoninianus minted at Rome in 265-7 AD with the bust of Sal-



Figure 1 – Bronze coin of Colossae with the head of Zeus on the obverse and a winged thunderbolt on the reverse. 20 mms diam. Sear 5131. (Source: CNG Electronic Auction 206, March 2009, lot 166)



Figure 2 – Bronze coin of Colossae with the radiate head of Apollo/Helios on the obverse and a lyre on the reverse. 14 mms diam. ?unpublished. (Source: Münzen & Medaillen Auction 21, May 2007, lot 723)

onina on the obverse (Sear, *Roman Coins*, Vol. III, 10633) and the other was a so-called anonymous follis minted at Constantinople in about 1045 AD (Sear, *Byzantine Coins*, 1825). This meagre

numismatic finding accords with the city's history, that it was in the Roman Empire and then the Byzantine Empire until it was abandoned in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The earliest coins attributed to the city are two small bronze coins. There is no indication of the date except that on the reverse the Greek word ΚΟΛΟΣΣΗΝΩΝ (of the Colossians) is spelt with Σ, not C. The change to C occurred on coins in about the first century AD, so these coins of Colossae would have been minted before that date and they are generally allocated to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

On the obverse of one of these early coins there is the laureate head of Zeus with his symbol, a thunderbolt, on the



Figure 3 – Map of the Maeander and Lycus Rivers.



Figure 5 – Bronze coin of Hadrian with the bust of Sabina on the obverse and Artemis on the reverse. 20 mms diam. Von Aulock, *Phryg. II*, 549. (Source: Lindgren III, *Ancient Greek Bronze Coins from the Lindgren Collection*, by H.C. Lindgren, 574)



Figure 6 – Bronze coin from the time of Hadrian with the radiate head of Apollo/Helios on the obverse and a recumbent river-god on the reverse. 16 mms diam. Von Aulock, *Phryg. II*, 452. (Image courtesy of Tom Vossen, [www.vcoins.com/tomvossen](http://www.vcoins.com/tomvossen))

reverse (Figure 1). On the obverse of the other coin there is the radiate head of a god (Figure 2) and such an image would previously have been recognized as that of Helios, the sun god, but by this time Helios was being identified with Apollo, the god of light. That the god on the coin is Apollo/Helios is suggested by the lyre, the symbol of Apollo, on the reverse. Originally in Greek mythology Apollo was different from Helios but as this coin suggests he was later identified with him.

Colossae is in the valley of the Lycus River about 200 kms east of Ephesus (Figure 3 – map). Today it is just a large mound (Figure 4) but in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Herodotus in his *Histories* (Book 7, Section 30) described Colossae as ‘a Phrygian city of great size’. In the first century BC Strabo in his *Geography* (12.8.13) called it a ‘polisma’, which was translated as ‘a small city’, but recently scholars think the word just means ‘a city’. The fact that no coins were issued by Colossae in the first century AD suggested that it was a small city of no importance and that the neighbouring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis had drained the



Figure 7 – Bronze coin from the time of Antoninus Pius with the bust of Sarapis on the obverse and Hygea standing and feeding a snake from a patera on the reverse. 20 mms diam. BMC 2. (Source: Gorny & Mosch Auction 204, lot 1805)



Figure 8 – Bronze coin from the time of Commodus as Caesar with the bust of Demos on the obverse and the cult statue of Artemis Ephesia on the reverse. 30 mms diam. Von Aulock, *Phryg. II*, 507. (Collection of St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane. Image used with permission.)

life out of it. An earthquake in the region in 60 AD, which was recorded by Tacitus in his *Annals* (14.27.1), was thought to have compounded the city’s decline. But an Australian scholar, Dr Allan Cadwallader, has refuted this concept. In a chapter entitled ‘Refuting an axiom of scholarship on Colossae: fresh insights from new and old inscriptions’ in the book that he edited with Dr Michael Trainor, *Colossae in Space and Time* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2011), he argued that the city continued to be prosperous. As evidence he described a stone altar that had been found at the site and dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. On it 66 names are listed as having contributed 1050 denarii for the repair of the city baths. Also he pointed out that 158 different coins have so far been attributed to Colossae up to the reign of Gallienus (253 – 268 AD) and although fewer than attributed to some other cities it is still a significant number. Most of the coins of Colossae were catalogued in 1987 by Hans von Aulock in *Münzen und Städte Phrygiens II*.

Dr Cadwallader thinks that the emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD) might have visited the city on his travels. A bust of his wife, Sabina, appears on a coin of Colossae with Artemis on the reverse (Figure 5). Artemis was the sister of



Figure 9 – Bronze coin from the time of Commodus with the head of Demos on the obverse and Helios in a quadriga on the reverse. 31 mms diam. Von Aulock, *Phryg. II*, 498. (Source: Triton V, January 2002, lot 1737)

Apollo, and the coin confirms that their cult was still strong at Colossae. Although the emperor’s name does not appear on it, a coin with the radiate head of Helios on the obverse and a recumbent river-god on the reverse (Figure 6) has been allocated to the time of Hadrian. A coin with the bust of Sarapis on the obverse and the figure of Hygea (Health) on the reverse (Figure 7) has been allocated to the time of Antoninus Pius (138-162 AD). Sarapis (Serapis is the more common spelling in Latin texts) was an Egyptian god who wore a modius, a vessel for measuring grain, on his head. He had been created by Ptolemy I (305-283 BC) to appeal to his Greek and Egyptian subjects.

The bust of L. Aelius Caesar (136-138 AD) occurs on the obverse of a coin with the cult statue of Artemis of Ephesus between two stags on the reverse. A



Figure 10 – Bronze coin with the bust of Commodus on the obverse and Artemis driving a biga of stags on the reverse. 35 mms diam. BMC 14. (Source: CNG Electronic Auction 224, December 2009, lot 417)



Figure 11 – Bronze coin with the bust of Commodus on the obverse and Artemis holding the antler of a stag on the reverse. 35 mms diam. Von Aulock, Phryg. II, 575. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane. Image used with permission.)

similar coin (Figure 8) with Demos (the people) on the obverse has been allocated to the time of Commodus as Caesar (175-177 AD). No doubt these coins were issued to promote the cult of Artemis by identifying the Artemis worshipped at Colossae with the Artemis worshipped at Ephesus in the great temple which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.



Figure 12 – Bronze coin of Commodus with his bust on the obverse and the Tyches of Colossae and Aphrodisias holding hands on the reverse. 34 mms diam. (Source: CNG Electronic Auction 115, May 2005, 248)



Figure 13 – Bronze coin of Colossae with the bust of Sarapis on the obverse and the figure of Isis on the reverse. BMC 6. 20 mms diam. (Source: Ancient Bronze Coins of Asia Minor and the Levant from the Lindgren Collection, by H.C. Lindgren and F.L. Kovacs, 929)

The head of Marcus Aurelius as Caesar (139-161 AD) appears on the obverse of a coin with Artemis running and holding a bow on the reverse. In Greek mythology she was a huntress who ran with the stags. A coin of Commodus has the bust of Demos on the obverse, and on the reverse there is Helios in a quadriga with the name of the magistrate, Apollonius, in the legend (Figure 9). Other coins with Commodus on the obverse have Artemis driving a biga of stags on the reverse (Figure 10) or holding a stag by its antlers (Figure 11). A large coin that Dr Cadwallader thinks is particularly significant has the bust of Commodus on the obverse and the Tyche (city goddess) of Colossae holding hands with the Tyche of Aphrodisias on the reverse (Figure 12). Aphrodisias was a large, prosperous city just to the south-

west, and the coin celebrates an alliance between the two cities. Dr Cadwallader considers that the coin shows how important Colossae was at the time.

The coins of Colossae mostly relate to the cult of Apollo/Helios and Artemis, and seem to have been fairly numerous in the second century. One wonders whether this output was intended to counter the growing popularity of Christianity in the area. The worship of Isis was also growing in popularity in the Roman Empire, but her cult was sanctioned in Rome, and Colossae issued a coin, probably in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, that has the bust of Sarapis on the obverse and the standing figure of Isis holding a sistrum (rattle) and a situla (bucket) on the reverse (Figure 13). Isis was originally from Egypt and it seems she was popular even in Colossae.

The archaeologists will probably be able to throw light on all these matters when they begin excavating at Colossae. A team from Flinders University in Adelaide is expecting to work on the project, but just when this will be has yet to be determined. When the archaeologists start digging, Christians around the world will be eager to know their findings. But what did Paul say in his letter to the Colossians? Well, you can read it yourself in the Bible. It comes after his letter to the Philippians in the New Testament

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Figure 14- Aerial view of the mound of Colossae. (Photo courtesy of Dr Alan Cadwallader)