

CHAPTER 47

GEOGRAPHY OF THE ISLAND OF PATMOS

Rev 1:9

Mark Wilson

KEY POINTS

- Patmos is a volcanic island located off the western coast of Asia Minor.
- The island was a colony of Miletus with a defensive fortress at Castelli.
- The Romans exiled political prisoners to islands in the Aegean Sea.
- Artemis Patmia was its patron goddess whose temple once stood at the site of the monastery at Chora.
- The cave in which John traditionally received his visions continues to function as an Orthodox church.
- Patmos' insularity surrounded by the sea influenced John's apocalyptic visions.

GEOGRAPHICAL SITUATION

Patmos is a volcanic island in the Icarian Sea, a subdivision of the Aegean, and one of the most northern of a chain of twelve Greek islands called the Dodecanese. Strabo (*Geography* 10.5.13) situates it among the islands of Leros, Icaria, and the Corassia. The island is shaped like a seahorse facing right. It has an area of 13.15 square miles (34.05 km²) and an irregular shoreline of bays and promontories measuring about 37 miles (60 km).

Pliny the Elder estimated less: "Patmos is thirty miles [48.3 km] in circumference" (*Natural History* 4.23 [LCL]). At its farthest point north to south the island extends about 8 miles (13 km). Patmos is divided into three sections connected by two low, narrow isthmuses. The northern section is the largest and broadest, spanning 3.5 miles (5.6 km) from Cape Zouloufi to Cape Geranos. The northern isthmus, just above Skala, measures 1230 feet (375 m) across. The southern isthmus

at Diakofti is 1007 feet (307 m) across. The island's highest point is the peak, Profitis Ilias, at 883 feet (269 m).¹



Atlas: The island of Patmos resembles a seahorse facing right.

Five small islets surround Patmos: Hiliomodi, Saint Thecla, Saint George, Tragonisi, and Prasonisi. Some twenty-five islands and islets are within visual distance of Patmos. Samos looms twenty-two miles (35 km) to the north-northeast. Asia Minor (modern Turkey)—particularly Mount Mycale (Dilek Dağı; 4058 feet [1237 m])—is vis-

ible thirty miles (49 km) to the north-east.² This fact is existentially significant because John could have seen the land of the Seven Churches from Patmos (see map on page XXX). When Paul sailed southward along the western coast of Asia Minor on his second and third journeys (Acts 18:21; 20:15; 21:1), Patmos would be barely discernible on the western horizon.

SETTLEMENT AND POLITICAL SITUATION IN ANTIQUITY

Pottery sherds found around Patmos indicate settlements in the Middle Bronze Age and Mycenaean period, while sherds found at the base of Castelli Fortress date to the Late Geometric, Classical, and Hellenistic periods. Phora (modern Skala) in the bay of Panormos developed as the island's port.³ Few historical sources mention the island. Thucydides (*History* 3.33) mentions that in 427 BC the Athenian general Paches pursued the Spartan fleet under Alcidas as far as Patmos, a natural development since the Spartans were using Miletus and its colonies as a base (*History* 8.79–80).

Anaximenes of Lampsacus, according to Strabo (*Geography* 14.1.6), stated that Leros and Ikaros were colonized by the city of Miletus. Since these islands frame Patmos on the southeast and northwest respectively, Patmos likely also came within the orbit of Miletus. Vanessa Gorman writes, "Most scholars presume that the Milesian influence on the islands—at least on Leros, Lepsia, Patmos,

1. A detailed and scalable map of the island is published online at: <http://ontheworldmap.com/greece/islands/patmos/patmos-tourist-map.jpg>. It gives the altitude of Profitis Ilias as 896 feet (273 m), apparently adding the monastery's height to the measurement.

2. At the western tip of the Mycale peninsula was the anchorage Trogyllum where Paul's ship was becalmed on his third journey, according to Codex Bezae (Acts 20:15 KJV, NKJV).

3. Phora is shown on map 61 in BAGRW.



Looking out at Patmos, Asia Minor is visible in the distance.

and probably on Ikaros as well—must have begun in the late seventh century.”⁴ Patmos formed part of a second line of islands comprising Miletus’ commercial sphere. These Milesian islands shared several common characteristics: “a minimal amount of arable land; in general, they are small, rocky, and undesirable except so far as they facilitated maritime trade.”⁵ Patmos also played a critical defensive role in protecting Miletus’ commercial routes. With Leros and Lepsi, Patmos was a *phourion* (φρούριον, “military fortress”). Milesian veterans formed an important population within the colony. The island was governed by a *phourarch* (φρούραρχος, *phourarchos*) who served as the commanding officer of the garrison. The island’s social, political, and economic life was thus oriented to Miletus for centuries.⁶ Pirates were an ongoing menace to these islands. Julius

Caesar was kidnapped by Cilician pirates in 75 BC and held on nearby Pharmakonisi for thirty-eight days. After a ransom of fifty talents of silver was paid, Caesar gathered a force at Miletus, captured the pirates, and had them crucified in Pergamum (Plutarch, *Julius Caesar* 2.1–7).

Preserved on the Castelli acropolis are sections of a fortification wall, gate with steps, and three towers built in isodomic style and dating probably to the third century BC. Above the modern church of Saints Constantine and Helena is the northwest tower still standing to eleven and a half feet (3.5 m). Castelli holds a commanding position that overlooks three bays: Skala to the east, Chochlaka to the south, and Merika to the northeast. In 129 BC the Romans gained the former Attalid kingdom and formed the province of Asia. Magie writes, “The new ‘Asia,’ therefore, extended from the Propontis

4. Vanessa B. Gorman, *Miletus: The Ornament of Ionia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 50.

5. Gorman, *Miletus*, 49.

6. Grüll Tibor, *Patmiaka: Two Studies on Patmos* (Budapest: Eötvös, 1989), 3.

on the north to the gulf of Cos on the south and included the islands along the coast, which must inevitably have been in close economic connection with the mainland.”⁷ During the struggle between



Skala Harbor and the Castelli Acropolis

Marc Antony and Octavian a century later, Patmos undoubtedly served as a base for Antony, as did all of Asia. With the inauguration of the Principate under Augustus in 27 BC and the resulting Pax Romana, the defensive importance of Castelli was reduced. From the Late Republic, Miletus served as the conventus of one of Asia's thirteen administrative districts. An inscription dating to the Flavian period found in Ephesus identifies only five cities attached to Miletus, however, none are on its offshore islands.⁸ Since these never gained the status of a *polis* (πόλις, “city”), this omission is expected. The governor conducted a court session (assize) annually in Miletus so it remained a prosperous city.⁹ Since Patmos' mainland connection continued through Miletus, its political

and economic fortunes also affected the island's residents.

RELIGIOUS SITUATION

Several religious sanctuaries were significant on Patmos. At Grikos Bay is a rocky promontory called Petra of Kallikatsou. Featuring rock-cut steps, artificial caves for offerings, and cisterns to provide water for sacred ceremonies, the rock functioned as an outdoor sanctuary beginning in the seventeenth century BC. The temple was probably dedicated to Aphrodite. In the Christian period its cavities were used as hermitages from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries.

The anonymous author of the *Stadiasmus Maris Magni* (#283) mentions an Amazon sanctuary on the island and notes it was 200 stadia (twenty-three miles [37 km]) from the Parthenion of Leros. Where this Amazonian was



Skala

located is debatable. It has been localized either on Patmos' northwestern tip or near its southern promontory at

7. David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 1:155.

8. Christian Habicht, “New Evidence on the Province of Asia,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 65 (1975): 77.

9. For a full discussion of Asia's conventus lists, see Habicht, “New Evidence,” 69–71. Four of the seven churches—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Sardis—were conventus cities.

Cape Vitsilia.¹⁰ The temple of Artemis Parthenos is located at Partheni Bay on northern Leros. From here, a direct sail to Patmos' southern tip is too short to fit the distance in the Stadiasmus, thus suggesting that the Amazonian is better localized on the northwestern coast.

Artemis Patmia was the patron goddess of the island. An inscription found at her temple site (the monastery's location) describes the cult's origin and practice on "the loveliest island of the daughter of Leto."¹¹ It mentions a foundation myth that Artemis was brought from Scythia by Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, to remove his terrible madness that resulted from the murder of his mother. The Patmian version of the Orestes myth differs from that of Euripides: Orestes overcame his crime by recovering a sacred statue of Artemis in Tauria believed to have fallen from heaven. Boxall concludes, "The Patmos inscription apparently claims that this sacred statue was brought, not to Athens, but to Artemis' own island of Patmos."¹²

The inscription also names Vera, a maiden priestess appointed by the Virgin Huntress herself. She was born on Patmos but raised on Artis (Argos?) and crossed the stormy Aegean to return home to sacrifice goats on the altar of Artemis Patmia. After this she organized a festive celebration and banquet. She

also held the honorific title of *hydrophoros* (ὕδροφόρος, "water-bearer"), one fre-



Artemis Temple Inscription

quently found on inscriptions of Miletus and Didyma. An inscription found at the latter's Apollo temple mentions another *hydrophoros* of Artemis Patmia, Aurelia Dionysiodora Matrona (*IDidyma* 492). This office fell to the daughters of the richest families since it entailed many expenses related to the numerous liturgical duties of her annual appointment. One particular duty of the *hydrophoros*

10. Northwestern tip: Johanna Schmidt, "Patmos," in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. A. Pauly et al. (Waldsee: Druckenmüller, 1949); also BAGRW, map 61; southern promontory: Adrienne Mayor, *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Amazon Warriors across the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 308.

11. The inscription (Syll.³ 11.52) dates to the third/fourth century AD and is now displayed in the monastery's museum. For a recent reconstruction and interpretation of this lacunose text, see Tibor, *Patmiaka*, 3–6, and H. W. Pleket and R. S. Stroud, "Patmos: Epigram for Versa, Hydrophoros of Artemis Patmia, 3rd/4th cent. A.D.," *SEG* 39:261–62, no. 855.

12. Ian Boxall, *Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 233. Boxall is reflecting the discussion of Victor Guérin, *Description de l'île de Patmos et de l'île de Samos* (Paris: Durand, 1856), 17–18, 59.

was to draw water from a sacred spring and pour it on the altar of Artemis.¹³

PATMOS AS A PLACE OF EXILE

In Revelation 1:9 John identifies his place of writing as the “island [*nēsos*, *νησος*] called Patmos.” The reason for his pres-



Cape Zouloufi

ence there is given next: “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.” This catchphrase is used in Revelation 6:9 and 20:4 as the reason for the martyrdom of the saints. In the first century AD the Romans often used Aegean islands to exile political prisoners. Among them were Cos, Rhodes, Samos, and Lesbos (Cassius Dio 56.27.1), Gyaros and Andros (Philo, *Flaccus* 1.51, 157, 159), Cynthos/Delos (Tacitus, *Annales* 3:69), and Amorgos and Donousa (Tacitus,

Annales 4.13, 30; cf. 15:71).¹⁴ There were two types of exiles. First, *deportatio in insulam* was ordered only by the emperor and pronounced against important citizens who fell into disfavor. This banishment was permanent with the guilty losing their civil rights and property. Second, *relegatio ad insulam* could be imposed by a provincial governor, either temporarily or permanently. No loss of Roman citizenship or property need result. John’s exile to Patmos was probably the latter, since church tradition suggests that he was later released to return to Ephesus (Eusebius, *Church History* 3.23). John was not sent to Samos, the island nearest to Ephesus, neither was he banished to a more barren island like Gyaros. Instead he was sent to a semiremote but inhabited island. Even though Patmos was connected to Miletus, John was apparently sent directly from the provincial capital Ephesus since Miletus is not among the seven churches. Church tradition places his exile during the reign of the emperor Domitian and release after his death (e.g., Eusebius, *Church History* 3.20.11; 3.23.1, 6). Because no persecution of Christians under Domitian is recorded by Roman historians, an alternate scenario situates John’s exile after Nero’s suicide in AD 68 and his release after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.¹⁵ The myth of Nero *redivivus* reflected in Revelation 13:3 and 17:8 gen-

13. For a full discussion of the *hydrophoros* and her duties, see Tibor, *Patmiaka*, 7–9.

14. For more on these banishments see Brian Rapske, “Exiles, Islands, and the Identity and Perspective of John in Revelation,” in *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture and Literary Context for the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 326–27.

15. Mark Wilson, “The Early Christians in Ephesus and the Date of Revelation, Again,” *Neotestamentica* 39 (2005): 186–89.



Mosaic of John and Prochorus on Patmos

erated its first pretender who appeared on the island of Cynthos/Delos in AD 69.¹⁶ The governor of Galatia, Calpurnius Asprenas, executed him and had his corpse brought to Ephesus where it was displayed publicly (Tacitus, *Histories* 2.8).

John's insularity for an indeterminate period appears to influence the imagery found in his vision.¹⁷ Surrounded by water during his exile, the sea (*thalassa*, θάλασσα) is a dominant image in Revelation with twenty-six references. For John, sea is a symbol of heavenly splendor (4:6; 15:2), God's creation

(5:13; 10:6), place of judgment (7:1–3; 8:8–9), abode of the first beast (13:1), domain of commerce (18:17, 19), holding place for souls (20:13), and absent in the new heaven and earth (21:1). Islands are mentioned at the opening of the sixth seal (6:14), and at the outpouring of the seventh bowl every island will disappear (16:20). Franz suggested that John was standing on the sand (*ammos*, ἄμμος) at Psili Ammos when he saw the vision of chapter 13.¹⁸ However, this beach's remote location on the rugged southwest coast

16. For a map showing the "Myth of Nero Redivivus or Nero Redux," see Mark Wilson, *Charts on the Book of Revelation: Literary, Historical, and Theological Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 116, no. 77.

17. The issues concerning the connectivity and insularity of Mediterranean islands through various periods has been a topic of recent scholarly discussion; see, e.g., the ten articles in Anna Kouremenos, ed. *Insularity and Identity in the Roman Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2018).

18. Gordon Franz, "The King and I: Exiled to Patmos, Part 2," <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/01/28/The-King-and-I-Exiled-To-Patmos-Part-2.aspx>.

A variant reading reflected in the KJV and NKJV has John standing on the sandy beach, not the beast.



Cave of the Apocalypse Interior

makes it unlikely that John would have walked there.

PATMOS IN LATER HISTORY

An apocryphal document called the Acts of John attributed to Prochorus probably originated in Patmos and dates to the fifth or sixth century AD. It recounts the writing of Prochorus, a deacon at Jerusalem (Acts 6:5). This text preserves extracts from the original Acts of John, a document deemed heretical by the church fathers (e.g., Eusebius, *Church History* 3.25.6). The story opens with John being directed in a vision to go to Ephesus from Miletus (18). The previous chapters 14–17, now missing, have been reconstructed to depict the departure of John and Prochorus from Patmos after the death of a Roman emperor unnamed but presumed to be Domitian. The two make

their way to Miletus by hanging onto a piece of cork oak.¹⁹ Other miracles performed by John on Patmos are recounted in the apocryphal Acts, scenes of which “adorn the exonarthex of monastery’s catholicon.”²⁰ The tradition regarding Prochorus remains entrenched on the island, and Orthodox icons depict John dictating his visions to his amanuensis. There are a number of caves on the island in which John could have sought shelter. However, the Cave of the Apocalypse is conveniently situated just below the road, still in use, that ran uphill from the harbor to the Artemis temple. In Late Antiquity this cave became a place of Christian pilgrimage. The Chapel of St. Anne, built around the cave’s entrance in the eleventh century, honored the mother of emperor Alexius I Comnenos. This cave sanctuary continues to function as a Greek Orthodox church. In 1088 the monastery at Chora was founded by a monk named Christodoulos who received permission from the emperor. When Comnenos sent Nikolas Tzanzas to the island in August of that year, he saw a chapel honoring John the Theologos standing on the hill where the monastery was soon built.²¹

The earliest basilicas on the island date to the fifth to sixth centuries AD. North of the Skala port and opposite the chapel of Hagios Theologos are scant remains of a Roman structure that, according to local tradition, comprise the baptismal font used by John. Since Patmos was inhabited in John’s day, no reason exists to pre-

19. J. K. Elliott, “The Acts of John,” in *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 311–47; István Czachesz, *Commission Narratives: A Comparative Study of the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 93, 96.

20. Otto F. A. Meinardus, “The Christian Remains of the Seven Churches of the Apocalypse,” *BA* 37 (1974): 70.

21. Tibor, *Patmiaka*, 7.



Monastery of St. John the Theologos

clude converts being made during his exile. Joseph Georgirenes, the archbishop of Samos, visited the island in 1677 and reported that the town near Skala was deserted. He was shown among the old ruins “a church yet standing which they say was built in St. John’s day and they show something like a pulpit, where they say St. John used to preach.”²² In 1896 the American explorer William Geil visited Patmos. His two maps of Patmos with its two main ports provide important cartographic information for the time. Similarly, his twenty-seven photographs provide visual documentation of its landscape and life in the late nineteenth century. Geil writes, “Standing on some one of the seven mountains of Patmos and looking off over the island with its three hundred and sixty-four churches, one

is impressed with the absence of steeples, there being not a single turret or spire on the crescent island.”²³ In 1999 UNESCO declared the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian and the Cave of the Apocalypse as World Heritage Sites. In the monastery’s museum is displayed Comnenos’ foundation chrysobull, a phourarch inscription from the first century BC, and several ancient manuscripts including a sixth-century vellum copy of Mark’s Gospel. Patmos remains the “Holy Island” not only for Greeks but also for Christians around the world.

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23. William Edgar Geil, *The Island that is Called Patmos* (Philadelphia: Rowland, 1896), 113.

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