

COS

The island of Cos (or Kos) is located in the southeastern Aegean Sea about three miles off the coast of western Turkey. It is part of the Dodecanese Islands, being the third largest behind Rhodes and Karpathos. The island is about 26 miles long and 5 miles wide. It has three distinct regions: (1) a central lowland of fertile soil along the northern coast (suitable for vineyards), (2) a rugged peninsula on the western end, and (3) a limestone ridge along the eastern portion of the southern coast. This third region features Mount Dikaios (Oromedon), which rises to a height of about 2,775 feet and serves as a landmark for sailors. The lower Mount Sympetro is also found in this region. Many beautiful beaches surround the island.

In ancient times, the island of Cos was also known as “Merope,” “Meropis,” “Cea,” and “Nymphaea” (Pliny *Natural History* 5.36). One tradition in Greek mythology is that the founder of Cos was King Merops and the island was named after his daughter (Hyginus *Poetical Astronomy* 2.16.2). Another tradition is that Coesus was the first person to inhabit the island and his daughter, the goddess Leto, was born there (Tacitus *Annals* 12.61).

Cos was inhabited at least by the third millennium B.C., as artifacts from the Aspri Petra (White Stone) Cave near Kephalos indicate. Discoveries also bear witness to the presence of the Mycenaeans on the island during the second millennium B.C. Sometime after the twelfth century B.C., Cos was settled by the Dorians (Strabo *Geography* 14.2.6).

During the early fifth century B.C., Cos was controlled by Artemisia, queen of Caria, who was under the authority of the Persian Empire (Herodotus *Histories* 7.99.1-2). However, after the Greeks defeated the Persians in the battles of Plataea and Mycale (Herodotus *Histories* 9.96—101), Cos rebelled against Artemisia and became a member of the Delian League (478 B.C.). The island was typically loyal to Athens during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.). After Rhodes revolted against Athens (412 B.C.), Cos served as the primary Athenian base in the southeastern Aegean.

Like the name “Rhodes,” the name “Cos” can refer either to the island or to its capital. References to Cos are attested as early as the eighth century B.C. (Homer *Iliad* 2.677; 14.255). In the fifth century B.C., Herodotus reported that the city was part of the Dorian Hexapolis, along with Lindos, Ialysus, Camirus, Cnidus, and Halicarnassus (*Histories* 1.144). Cos may have become the island’s capital at this time, although some date it later. Diodorus Siculus wrote,

The Coans transferred their abode to the city they now inhabit and made it a notable place; for a large population was gathered into it, and costly walls and a considerable harbor were constructed. From this time on its public revenues and private wealth constantly increased, so much that it became in a word a rival of the leading cities of Greece (*Library of History* 15.76.2).

The capital of the island had previously been at Astypalaia on the western end near Kephalos (Strabo *Geography* 14.2.19). Cos was laid out on a grid with main intersecting streets in Hippodamian fashion.

Cos rebelled against Athens about 357 B.C. and came under the authority of Mausolos, the king of Caria. When Alexander the Great was victorious at Halicarnassus in 334 B.C., Cos became a part of his Greek Empire. After Alexander's death and the division of his kingdom, Cos was controlled by the Ptolemies, and they used the island as a naval base in the Aegean region. However, around 260 B.C., the Macedonian king Antigonos II defeated the Ptolemies and perhaps took control of Cos. Later, the island came under Rhodes' influence. Then, during the second century B.C., Cos fell under the sway of the Romans.

Although often subjected to other nations or city-states, the city (and island) of Cos thrived culturally and economically during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. (1) Supported by the upper class, the city of Cos developed a large library in the second century B.C., consisting of at least 500 scrolls (S. Johnstone, "A New History of Libraries and Books in the Hellenistic Period," *Classical Antiquity* [Oct 2014]: 352-54). (2) The wines produced on the island were famous and widely exported (Demosthenes *Against Lacritus* 35.35; Strabo *Geography* 14.2.19). Pliny stated that Cos' grapes were "inferior to none in sweetness" (Pliny *Natural History* 15.18). (3) The pottery vessels of Cos were "highly celebrated for their beauty" (*Natural History* 35.46). (4) The island was well known for its silk fabrics (Horace *Odes* 4.13; Sextus Propertius *Elegies* 1.2). Aristotle wrote, "A class of women unwind and reel off the cocoons of these creatures [caterpillars] and afterwards weave a fabric with the threads thus unwound; a Coan woman by the name of Pamphila, daughter of Plateus, being credited with the first invention of the fabric" (*History of Animals* 5.19). (5) The city of Cos boasted a huge marketplace (*agora*) where business was transacted. (6) The Sanctuary of Asclepius, an important center for medicine and healing, was situated about two miles southwest of the city of Cos. Numerous Asclepeia were located throughout the Mediterranean world, but the most significant ones were at Cos, Pergamum, and Epidaurus. Having been built on terraces, the complex near Cos had a Doric temple, a great altar, smaller temples, and other buildings (where patients slept). Strabo described the Asclepeion "in the suburb" of Cos as being "a temple exceedingly famous and full of numerous votive offerings" (Strabo *Geography* 14.2.19).

The methodology used at this Asclepeion was unique compared to other healing centers. This resulted from the earlier influence of Hippocrates, who is considered to be "the father of modern medicine." Hippocrates was the son of the physician Heraclides, and he was likely born on the island of Cos about 460 B.C. He established a scientific method for curing illnesses rather than relying on traditional psychosomatic and superstitious approaches (such as, reciting incantations or making sacrifices to placate the gods). Hippocrates believed in strengthening the body's resistance against disease, advocated a healthy diet, and investigated the effects of herbs and healing plants. He promoted the recording of medical treatments and their results. He used clinical observations and logical deductions to treat illnesses.

Hippocrates established a school of medicine and accelerated the medical profession. Celsus described him in these words: “Hippocrates of Cos, a man first and foremost worthy to be remembered, notable both for professional skill and for eloquence, who separated this branch of learning from the study of philosophy” (*De Medicina* 1, Prooemium). He reportedly lectured to his students under a plane tree. Tourists visiting Cos today are shown the Plane Tree of Hippocrates; some speculate that it is a descendant of the original tree. Regarding ethics, Hippocrates (or one of his students) wrote “The Hippocratic Oath,” which is still used in a modified form by some medical professionals today. A collection of about sixty works are attributed to Hippocrates and his followers in the Hippocratic Corpus. The work of Hippocrates served as a foundation for the practice and writing of the later physician Galen (A.D. 129-216).

An ancient coin minted at Cos from the Roman period features the image of Hippocrates on the obverse (heads); the reverse (tails) has the Asclepian medical symbol of a serpent coiled around a staff. The coin is housed in the British Museum (1837, 1030.2). In 2013, Greece minted new Euro coins that have Hippocrates’ image on the obverse and a rendition of an Asclepius frieze on the reverse.

In the Roman period, Cos became a part of the province of Asia. Having been influenced by his personal physician, Xenophon of Cos, the emperor Claudius declared Cos to be a free city immune from taxation in A.D. 53 (Tacitus *Annals* 12.61). Xenophon was highly respected by the people of Cos, as honorific inscriptions from that city testify. Ironically, Xenophon was suspected of helping the wife of Claudius poison her husband in A.D. 54 (*Annals* 12.67); however, she may have succeeded without his involvement (Pliny *Natural History* 22.46; Suetonius *Lives of the Caesars: Claudius* 43—44; Dio Cassius *Roman History* 61.34).

Cos is mentioned once in the New Testament. Near the end of the third missionary journey (c. A.D. 57), as Paul was returning to Jerusalem, he stopped at Miletus and called for the Ephesian elders to meet with him there (Acts 20:17). The apostle reminded these godly men of his tireless ministry of preaching and teaching in their city. He then admonished them to be vigilant in their role of overseeing and shepherding the flock, the church of God. He used his own service to Christ as a model for these brothers to follow (Acts 20:18-35). In a touching scene, “he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him” (Acts 20:37). Concerning the departure of Paul and his traveling companions from Miletus, Luke reported, “After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara” (Acts 21:1). Interestingly, the reverse order—Rhodes, Cos, Miletus—is found in one ancient source (Xenophon *Hellenica* 1.5), which suggests that these ports were common stops while sailing along the coast of Asia Minor.

Paul’s entourage spent the night at Cos, whether on the ship in the harbor or on the island. In antiquity, sailors and passengers would often leave the cramped ship and spend the night in tents at the port city. Paul the tentmaker (Acts 18:3) and his friends may have done the same on this occasion.

Many ancient ruins can be seen on the island of Cos today, both at the former capital Astypalaia and at the latter capital Cos. Regarding Cos, the Asclepeion and the agora have already been mentioned. The Asclepeion essentially served as a place of worship, a hospital, and a school of medicine. The agora contains ruins of temples dedicated to Hercules and Aphrodite and an arcade that was next to the ancient harbor. Other significant structures include the altar of Dionysus, the stadium, the gymnasium, the nymphaeum, the Roman odeon, Casa Romana (a Roman villa decorated with mosaics and frescoes), Roman baths, and an early Christian basilica. The Archaeological Museum of Cos houses artifacts from the Asclepeion, many mosaics, and numerous Greco-Roman statues, including one of Hippocrates. (For archaeological photos of Cos, see www.kos.gr.)