

THESSALONICA

Thessalonica was located on the Chalcidice peninsula of Macedonia at the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea. It was built either on or near the site of ancient Therma. The designation Therma is derived from the hot springs found in the vicinity. Therma was located beside the Thermaic Gulf and gave the gulf its name (Herodotus *Histories* 7.121.1). Strabo stated that Thessalonica was known in earlier times by the name Therma (*Geography* 7, fragment 24). Pliny painted a different picture, speaking of Therma and Thessalonica as coexisting side by side (*Natural History* 4.17[10]). It could be that many of the residents were moved from Therma (as well as other towns) to populate Thessalonica.



Modern Thessaloniki and the Thermaic Gulf

Thessalonica was built about 315 B.C. by Cassander, one of the *Diadochoi* (“Successors”) of Alexander the Great. According to Strabo, Therma was rebuilt by Cassander and named after his wife *Thessalonikē*, the daughter of Philip II (*Geography* 7, fragment 24). Her name is a combination of *Thessalos* (“Thessaly”) and *nikē* (“victory”); it was given to her to commemorate her father’s earlier “victory in Thessaly.” She was also a younger half-sister of Alexander the Great.



This modern bronze statue features Alexander the Great riding his favorite horse Bucephalus, whom he used throughout his military career. Alexander's sight is fixed on the East, the region he ultimately conquered. The statue was produced in 1973. It is now displayed on the promenade by the Thermaic Gulf in modern Thessaloniki.

Due to the strategic position of Thessalonica on the Thermaic Gulf, the city served as an important Macedonian naval base (Livy *History of Rome* 44.10.1). After the Roman victory over Macedon at the Battle of Pydna (168 B.C.), Thessalonica was appointed the capital of the second of four districts in Macedonia (Livy *History of Rome* 45.29.9). When Macedonia later became a single Roman province (146 B.C.), Thessalonica was selected as its capital. The Romans made Thessalonica a "free city" after its inhabitants assisted Antony and Octavian in the Battle of Philippi (42 B.C.) (Pliny *Natural History* 4.17[10]). As such, it possessed certain administrative and judicial liberties as well as the right to mint coins. In the first century A.D., Strabo described Thessalonica as the most populated city in Macedonia (*Geography* 7.7.4). It was a strategic center from which the gospel could be spread. Paul later wrote to the Thessalonian Christians, "The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere" (1 Thess. 1:8).

Constructed in the second century B.C., the Egnatian Way (*Via Egnatia*) crossed Illyricum, Macedonia, and Thrace. Originally, it ended at Cypsela (Ipsala) (Strabo *Geography* 7.7.4); but later it was expanded to Byzantium. On the second missionary journey, Paul and his coworkers traveled along the Egnatian Way from the port of Neapolis to Philippi (see Acts 16:11, 12). When they left Philippi, they continued west on this road through Amphipolis and Apollonia to arrive at Thessalonica (see Acts 17:1). (For more information, see *Amphipolis & Apollonia*.) The distance between Philippi and Thessalonica was roughly one hundred miles.

Paul in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9)

When Paul’s team arrived in Thessalonica (c. A.D. 50), they found a Jewish synagogue there (Acts 17:1). Sometime after the death of Alexander the Great (323 B.C.), many Jews had spread throughout the major cities of the Greek Empire. As a result, Thessalonica had a significant Jewish population by the first century. Paul continued his missionary strategy of going to the local synagogue and reasoning from the Scriptures about Christ with those present (Acts 17:2). His aims were (1) to prove that the Messiah had to suffer, die, and rise from the dead, and (2) to show that Jesus is the Messiah who fulfilled those prophecies (Acts 17:3).

While Acts 17:2 states that Paul spent “three Sabbath days” at the synagogue, it has been suggested that he stayed in the city itself for a longer period—perhaps a few months. Three arguments have been made to support this contention. (1) Paul was in Thessalonica long enough to become an example of earning a living by difficult manual labor (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7, 8). (2) He received financial support for his ministry on multiple occasions from Philippi (Phil. 4:16). (3) In addition to evangelizing Jews and proselytes, he also converted pagan idolaters to Christ (1 Thess. 1:9). These details likely point to an extended stay in the city.

Paul and Silas experienced some positive responses to the gospel they preached in the synagogue. The favorable responders included Jews and God-fearing Greeks. Among this latter category were some of the city’s “prominent women,” who came from wealthy and influential families (Acts 17:4). In response to those conversions to Christ, the unbelieving Jews became jealous and began persecuting the church. They used some wicked men among the loafers in the marketplace (*agoraiōn*) to form a mob and start a riot (Acts 17:5). The Jews intended to bring Paul and Silas either out to the “crowd” or before the “public assembly.” It may be that *dēmos* has the latter (more technical) meaning in this context.



Roman Forum (2nd Century A.D.)

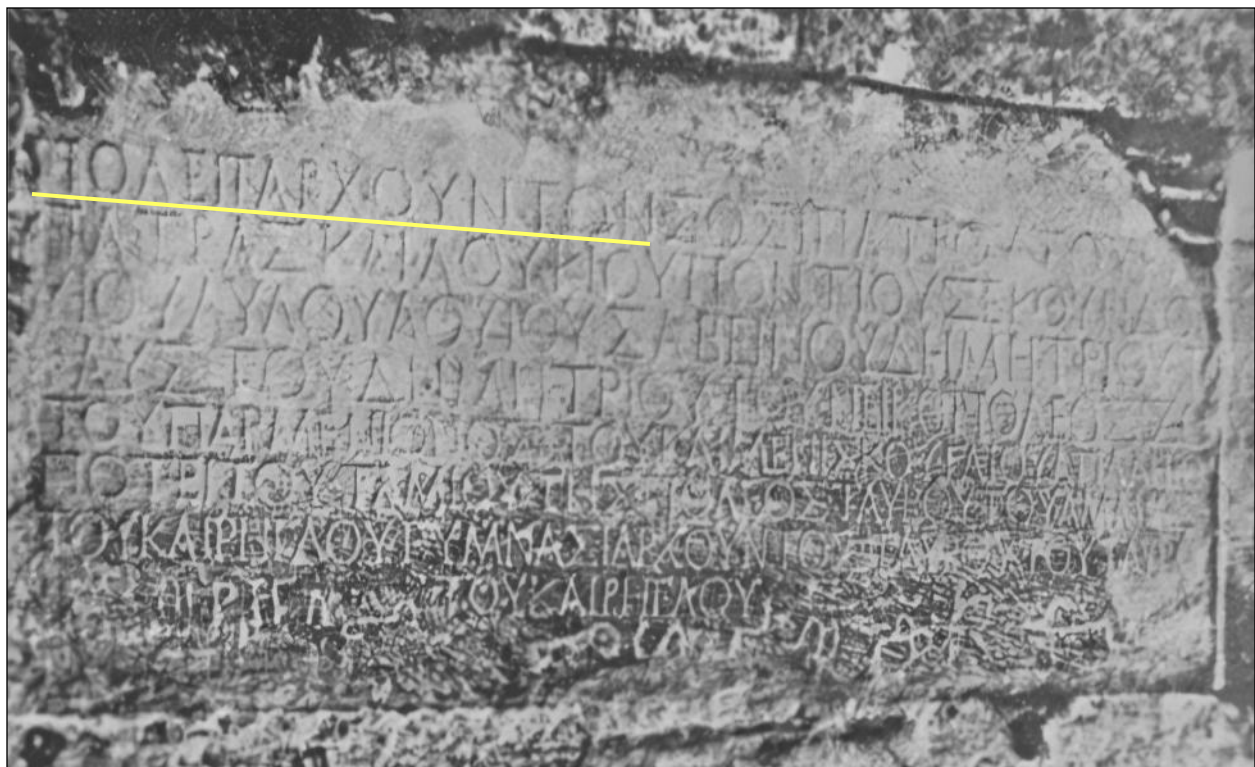


Little can be seen of ancient Thessalonica today, since the thriving modern city of Thessaloniki covers it. Nevertheless, remnants of the Roman forum, which probably date to the second century A.D., are still visible. This forum may have been built on top of the earlier Hellenistic agora. An odeon, or small theater, can also be seen. It would have been used for musical and theatrical performances. Only seven of its many rows of seats have been preserved. Other public buildings in Thessalonica included the gymnasium, stadium, nymphaeum, and Serapion (McRay, 294; Michael Vickers, "Hellenistic Thessaloniki," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 92 [1972]: 156-70). Many artifacts relating to Thessalonica and Macedonia from various periods are on display at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki.



Failing to find Paul and Silas, the unbelieving Jews along with the mob turned their aggression against the new Christians (see 1 Thess. 2:14). In particular, they targeted Jason for entertaining Paul and Silas as guests in his home. They were accusing the missionaries of treason against Rome—acting against the emperor’s decrees and proclaiming another king, Jesus (Acts 17:6, 7). No doubt, key terms in the missionaries’ preaching—such as, “Lord,” “Savior,” “king,” “kingdom,” and “coming” (*parousia*)—were misinterpreted as a threat to Caesar’s reign over the empire. By hosting the two men, Jason was viewed as an accomplice to their “crimes.” The mob must have been easily agitated at the supposed rebellion against Rome and the thought of losing Thessalonica’s favored status as a free city.

Jason and other Christians were dragged before the “city officials” or “politarchs.” The Greek term *politarchēs* is a compound word meaning “ruler of the citizens.” It is only used in the New Testament in Acts 17:6, 8. Liberal skeptics once contended that Luke had invented this term, since they could not find it in any other early Greek sources. (Actually, a variant of the word does appear in Aeneas Tacticus *Poliorcetica* 26.12 [fourth century B.C.], but it is used in a military sense.) Making such an argument against the Word of God—which is based on the absence of evidence—has repeatedly proven to be foolish. An inscription dating from the second century A.D. was noticed in the 1800s that corroborated Luke’s historical accuracy. It was part of a Roman arch in the Vardar Gate at the western end of Egnatia Street. The arch was torn down in 1876, but the inscription was preserved and taken to the British Museum.



Politarch Inscription from the Vardar Gate at Thessalonica
(Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons)

The first word of the inscription (*poleitarchountōn*) is a participle, meaning “serving as politarchs.” Six (or possibly seven) of these officials are named on the inscription, and three of them share a name with biblical characters: “Sosipatros” (“Sosipater”), “Secundus,” and “Gaius” (Acts 19:29; 20:4; Rom. 16:21). Other office holders named in the inscription include the city treasurer and gymnasiarch. (For a translation of the inscription, see Clyde E. Fant and Mitchell G. Reddish, *Lost Treasures of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 366-67.)

Since the discovery of the politarch inscription at the Vardar Gate, many others have been found. A conservative estimate of this number would be sixty. Some inscriptions are damaged and the text must be reconstructed; thus, certainty regarding the mention of politarchs is not always achievable. Horsley presented seventy-two possibilities. The majority of these inscriptions originated in Macedonia, especially Thessalonica. Others came from the adjacent territories of Epiros, Illyricum, and Thrace (G. H. R. Horsley, “The Politarchs in Macedonia, and Beyond,” *Mediterranean Archaeology* 7 [1994]: 99-126).

The date when the office of politarchs originated is debatable. Some think that it appeared in the third century B.C., while others point to 167 B.C. after the Romans gained control of Macedonia (following the monarchical period). Politarchs were elected annually and could serve more than one term. Their number varied from city to city; typically, three to seven men served in each city. In Thessalonica, the number ranged from five to seven. Politarchs generally came from the wealthier class. They possessed executive, administrative, and judicial authority. They might convene a popular assembly, put their seals on a decree and oversee its execution, grant citizenship, maintain civil order, and oversee judicial proceedings.

The politarchs made Jason and the other believers “post bond” and released them (Acts 17:9). While the term *hikanos* by itself means “sufficient,” the phrase *labontes to hikanon* used here seems to be a technical expression for receiving security. The purpose of this bond money is not explained. It may have served as assurance that the city would not be troubled by Jason’s guests anymore. As a result of the riot, the Christians sent Paul and Silas away to Berea that night under the cloak of darkness (Acts 17:10).

Paul’s Letters (1, 2 Thessalonians)

Later on the same missionary journey, Paul wrote First and Second Thessalonians from Corinth to the young church at Thessalonica (A.D. 51-52). Those Christians were experiencing persecution, just as he and Silas had (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:2). Paul had been “torn away” (“made an orphan by separation”) from the Christians at Thessalonica; he repeatedly wanted to visit them but was hindered by Satan (1 Thess. 2:17, 18). Nevertheless, he was able to send Timothy in his place for the purpose of strengthening and encouraging their faith (1 Thess. 3:2, 3).

First and Second Thessalonians are some of the earliest of Paul’s letters preserved in the New Testament (probably written after Galatians). By this point in his life, Paul had embraced the custom of using a secretary for the main body of a letter and then writing the final greeting in his own hand (2 Thess. 3:17).

Several themes are interwoven into the Thessalonian letters. (1) Paul reassured the young Christians of his love for them, since they were special to him (1 Thess. 2:7, 8, 11, 17-20; 3:6; 2 Thess. 1:3, 4). (2) He admonished them to remain steadfast in their faith, despite the persecutions they were facing (1 Thess. 1:3, 6; 2:14-16; 3:2, 3, 8; 2 Thess. 1:4, 5; 2:15). (3) The apostle corrected the misconceptions that some of them had concerning the second coming of Christ. He made it clear that Jesus had not returned yet, but when he did it would be unmistakable. Faithful Christians who had already died would be raised to life, and those still living would join them to meet the Lord in the air. He would reward his faithful followers but bring wrath upon their opponents (1 Thess. 1:10; 2:19, 20; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:1-3, 23, 24; 2 Thess. 1:6-10; 2:1-12). (4) In the meantime, the believers were to live upright and godly lives in view of Christ's coming and were to continue growing spiritually (1 Thess. 4:1-10; 5:4-11). (5) They were not to be idle, but were to work hard as Paul and his coworkers had done among them. By so doing, they would bring glory to Christ (1 Thess. 2:9; 4:11, 12; 5:14; 2 Thess. 1:11, 12; 2:16, 17; 3:6-13).

Later Roman and Christian History

Tourists visiting Thessaloniki today can view buildings and monuments related to later Roman and Christian history. The Arch of Galerius is located alongside Egnatia Street. It was dedicated in A.D. 303 to commemorate Galerius' victory over the Sassanid Persian Empire a few years earlier. The arch was connected to the Rotunda of Galerius as well as the Palace of Galerius. Galerius was a junior emperor at the time he defeated the Persians; but, following the retirement of Diocletian, Galerius became emperor of the eastern half of the Roman Empire. He reigned from Thessalonica.



The Arch of Galerius (Right)

Originally, it was a triple arch, but only two of the arches are standing today.

The Rotunda of Galerius (Left)

The Rotunda was originally built as a mausoleum or a pagan temple. Later, it was used as a Christian basilica, a Muslim mosque (note the minaret), and again as a Christian basilica. It is referred to today as "the Church of Saint George," "the Rotunda of Saint George," or simply "the Rotunda."

Being a staunch pagan, Galerius was notorious for persecuting Christians. While a junior emperor, he had influenced Diocletian in his great persecution of Christians in A.D. 303, convincing the emperor that followers of Christ were dangerous enemies of the empire. After taking the throne as emperor, Galerius continued to wreak havoc on Christians—destroying their church buildings, burning their Scriptures, and torturing and killing them (Lactantius *On the Death of Persecutors* 10—22). His six-year reign (A.D. 305-311) is considered the last official persecution of Christians in the Roman world. Lactantius described him in these words:

In this wild beast there dwelt a native barbarity and a savageness foreign to Roman blood; and no wonder, for his mother was born beyond the Danube. . . . The form of Galerius corresponded with his manners. Of stature tall, full of flesh, and swollen to a horrible bulk of corpulency; by his speech, gestures, and looks, he made himself a terror to all that came near him (*On the Death of Persecutors* 9).

Surprisingly, while nearing the end of life, Galerius signed an Edict of Toleration toward Christians in A.D. 311. This occurred because he viewed his serious illness as retribution from the God of Christians for his harsh treatment of them (*On the Death of Persecutors* 33—34). In A.D. 313, Constantine enacted the Edict of Milan, further protecting the rights of Christians.

According to church tradition, one of the martyrs during the persecution of Diocletian and Galerius was a Roman officer named “Demetrius.” He was reportedly imprisoned and killed at a Roman bath, being run through with a spear for being a Christian. Demetrius was eventually elevated to sainthood and became the patron saint of Thessalonica. (This practice contradicts the New Testament, which teaches that all Christians are “saints” [Rom. 1:7] and the only mediator between God and men is Jesus Christ [1 Tim. 2:5].) A small chapel was constructed over the ruins of the Roman bath in the fourth century A.D., venerating the site of martyrdom; but it was replaced by a basilica in the fifth century. Then, in the seventh century, a larger basilica was constructed—The Church of St. Demetrius. It was used as a mosque during the Ottoman occupation (1493-1912), but reverted to Orthodox services after the Greeks gained their independence. Following a fire in 1917, the basilica was reconstructed over the course of several decades. It supposedly houses the remains of St. Demetrius in the crypt.



Silver Reliquary with the Supposed Relics of St. Demetrius



Church of St. Demetrius



This marble basin is stationed outside the Church of St. Demetrius. It was recovered during the reconstruction of the building in the 1900s. According to Greek Orthodox lore, it was used to collect the holy myrrh that exuded from the relics of the martyred saint. The legend of this strange phenomenon gave rise to Demetrius' nickname "Myrrh-gusher." Such claims have no connection with the authentic miracles of the New Testament.



White Tower

White Tower is located on the waterfront beside the Thermaic Gulf. It measures approximately 110 feet high (the turret is an additional 20 feet) and 75 feet in diameter (at its base). The tower was built during the Ottoman occupation of Thessaloniki (fifteenth or sixteenth century A.D.) as a replacement for earlier Byzantine fortifications. It was used by the Turks as a fortress, garrison, and prison. Since the tower was the site of many executions, it was called “Tower of Blood” or “Red Tower.” Nevertheless, the tower was whitewashed in the late 1800s, and it has been known as “White Tower” ever since—even though it now looks beige. The tower is a famous landmark that has become iconic for Thessaloniki. It presently functions as a museum that explains the city’s long history. Today, Thessaloniki is the second largest city in Greece behind Athens.