



Laodicea's 'Lukewarm' Legacy

Conflicts of Prosperity in an Ancient Christian City

Mark R. Fairchild

"You are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

—REVELATION 3:15–16

THIS PRONOUNCEMENT BY THE AUTHOR OF the Book of Revelation regarding the church at Laodicea has become the Laodicean church's most memorable legacy. What induced such a statement? Although archaeology doesn't usually play a major role in the interpretation of apocalyptic literature like

MIXING JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS. Etched into this broken column fragment are four religious symbols: a menorah, *lulav* (palm branch), *shofar* (ram's horn) and cross. The first three symbols are Jewish, but the cross is distinctly Christian. The column originally belonged to a *nymphaeum* (a public fountain) in Laodicea. The Jewish symbols were likely added to the column in the late Roman or early Byzantine period, and the cross was added in the early Byzantine period. That the Christian cross extends from the Jewish menorah suggests that the Laodicean church grew out of the synagogue.

the Book of Revelation, this may be an exception.

For most of its existence, Laodicea was an affluent and prosperous Phrygian city in the fertile Lycus River valley in what is now western Turkey. It sat along trade routes that led to major ports on the coast. From a Christian perspective, however, Laodicea had a checkered history. At times the Laodicean church appeared strong and prosperous; at other times the church waffled in its commitments to Christ.

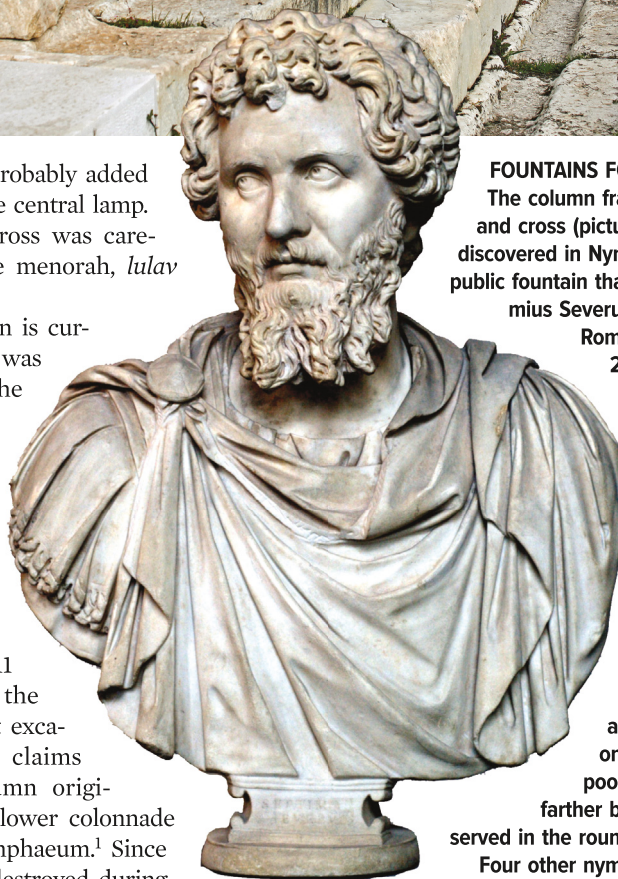
One of the most intriguing archaeological discoveries at Laodicea is a broken column located in the central agora. Carved into the column is a seven-branched menorah flanked by a *lulav* (palm branch) and a *shofar* (ram's horn), two common Jewish symbols, found especially in synagogues. Flames can be seen flickering above the menorah's seven lamps.



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Additionally, a cross (probably added later) emerges from the central lamp. Whoever added the cross was careful not to damage the menorah, *lulav* or *shofar*.

Although the column is currently in the agora, it was originally found in the nearby basin of Nymphaeum A (one of Laodicea's decorative fountains). According to an inscription, this nymphaeum was dedicated to the Roman emperor Septimius Severus (r. 193–211 C.E.). Celal Şimşek, the director of the current excavations at Laodicea, claims that the broken column originally belonged to the lower colonnade of the two-storied nymphaeum.¹ Since the nymphaeum was destroyed during the 494 C.E. earthquake, we can assume that the menorah was added to the column during the late Roman period or early Byzantine period and that the cross was added to the menorah during the early Byzantine period.



FOUNTAINS FOR NYMPHS AND KINGS.

The column fragment with a menorah and cross (pictured on p. 30) was initially discovered in Nymphaeum A, a two-storied public fountain that was dedicated to Septimius Severus. Severus (left) ruled the Roman Empire from 193 to 211 C.E. He came to power through military strength and established the Severan dynasty of Roman emperors. The outside of Nymphaeum A—with two steps leading up to it—is pictured above. Below the first step is a gutter that took excess water away from the fountain. Two circular water basins are on the upper step (the one in the foreground is poorly preserved; the one farther back in the picture is preserved in the round).

Four other nymphaea have been uncovered at Laodicea. In its earliest form, a nymphaeum was a grotto dedicated to the nymphs, female nature deities. Grottoes were selected as suitable shrines because nymphs were thought to inhabit them. Eventually, a nymphaeum came to refer to man-made grottoes and elaborate fountains—often decorated with statues.

INSET: PALAZZO BECOUAVIA IN VERONA; PURCHASED IN ROME IN 1822

The coexistence of these Christian and Jewish symbols connected to one another on the same column suggests that the Christian and Jewish communities in Laodicea mutually respected each other and existed in the city without animosity. It is also possible that these symbols suggest that the Christian church in Laodicea emerged from the synagogue—which is consistent with the apostle Paul's mission strategy that prioritized cities and towns with a Jewish population (see Romans 1:16; Acts 13:46).

But was the apostle Paul the one who founded the church in Laodicea?

The precise details of the founding of the Christian faith there are unknown, and it is difficult to piece together an understanding of those earliest years. Apart from a few passing references to a church at Laodicea, the New Testament and early Christian writings are silent. But we can plausibly describe the scenario of the earliest Christian developments in Laodicea from the evidence, scant though it is, that has survived.

The Acts of the Apostles traces Paul's route on his third mission through Galatia (probably Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch) and Phrygia (Acts 18:23) before making his way to the "upper country" (ἀνωτερικὰ μέρη) (Acts 19:1) and—finally—to Ephesus, the largest and most important city on the western coast of Asia. Aside from being rather vague about the route through Galatia and Phrygia, the reference to the "upper country" is downright befuddling. Since the most direct route from Pisidian Antioch to Ephesus would have taken Paul on the Roman road through Laodicea, one might assume that Paul evangelized the city during his third mission. However, when writing to the Colossians several years later, Paul strongly suggests that he never visited Laodicea: "I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face" (Colossians 2:1).

So, what is the understanding of Luke's phrase "upper country" (ἀνωτερικὰ μέρη)? David G. Peterson of Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia (followed by Eckhard J. Schnabel of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) suggests that Paul took a more northern route to Ephesus.²



ANTIOCHUS II THEOS ruled the Seleucid empire from 261 to 246 B.C.E. He is responsible for naming the site Laodicea after his wife, Laodice I. Later he divorced Laodice, but the name stuck.

This less-direct route would not have followed any known Roman roads and would have bypassed Laodicea.³ Paul may have taken this longer and more difficult route to Ephesus on his third mission to avoid the same hindrance that prevented him from entering Asia on his second mission

(see Acts 16:6).⁴

Yet if Paul was never in Laodicea, how was the church established? When Paul wrote to the Colossians, he praised them for their faith and for how the gospel had been increasing since the day when they first heard it—"just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bondservant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf" (Colossians 1:6-7). Epaphras was one of Paul's disciples and was probably a convert of Paul's during his time in Ephesus.⁵

A native Colossian (see Colossians 4:12), Epaphras not only believed the Christian message, but also became a minister of the gospel.⁶ Epaphras converted to the Christian faith in Ephesus, was trained at the School of Tyrannus in Ephesus and then returned to his family, friends and kinfolk in





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TEMPLE TO THE EMPEROR. Laodicea's Temple A was originally dedicated to Apollo, Artemis and Aphrodite. Later it served as a temple for the imperial cult. Part of the colonnade (row of columns) surrounding Temple A is visible in the above image—with the temple itself in the background.

Colossae to share the gospel message. Along the way, he likely evangelized Colossae's two close neighbors, Laodicea and Hierapolis.⁷ Traveling from Ephesus to Colossae along that road, Epaphras would have come first to Laodicea and then continued east for another 8 miles before arriving home in Colossae.

We know that Paul's mission strategy, which Epaphras may have adopted, prioritized cities and towns with a Jewish population (Romans 1:16; Acts 13:46). Paul almost always preached first in the synagogue, not in the agora. Since Colossae has never been excavated, it is not surprising that no archaeological evidence of a Jewish presence in that city has ever been found. However, Jewish artifacts have been uncovered from Laodicea and Hierapolis. The necropolis in Hierapolis contains a large number of tombs with menorahs and Jewish inscriptions, which reflects a large Jewish presence. In addition to the column with a menorah, *lulav* and *shofar*, testaments of Laodicea's ancient Jewish population can be seen in several unpublished Jewish inscriptions that Şimşek and his team have discovered.

How there came to be a strong Jewish population in this area is an interesting story.

Although Laodicea had been occupied since the

Chalcolithic period (c. 5500 B.C.E.), its documented history goes back only to the early Hellenistic period (early third century B.C.E.). Pliny explains that the city was known as Diospolis (the city of Zeus) earlier during the Classical period, but little is known about the city during that period. At that time the city acknowledged Zeus as the primary patron deity. Later the city was known as Rhoas. Around 260 B.C.E., the Seleucid king Antiochus II named the city after his wife Laodice. Since the city was located near the Lycus River, the city was dubbed Laodicea ad Lycum to differentiate the various cities named Laodicea.

Josephus tells us that, in the late third century, Antiochus III transplanted 2,000 Jewish families from Babylonia to Lydia and Phrygia. These families were led by former Jewish military leaders who had served Antiochus faithfully in Babylonia and Mesopotamia and were placed in Phrygia and Lydia to stabilize that region at a time when the loyalties of the Phrygian and Lydian people were unclear.

For the most part Laodicea remained under the control of the Seleucids until the Battle of Magnesia in 189 B.C.E., when the Romans and Pergamenes drove the Seleucids out of western Anatolia. With the treaty of Apameia in 188, the Romans handed over control of the territory to the Pergamon kingdom, where it remained until the death of Attalus III in 133 B.C.E. Upon his death, Attalus III bequeathed the entire Pergamon kingdom to the Romans, whereupon the area became the Roman province of Asia.



THE NORTHERN AGORA. Laodicea had five agoras (assembly places). As an important city along a major trade route and with an extensive textile industry, the city evidently felt it needed all these agoras for doing business—although one agora functioned as a political agora or forum. Part of the impressive stoa (covered walkway, above) in Laodicea’s northern agora has been reconstructed by Celal Şimşek and his team.

Laodicea was prosperous and served as a textile production center as well as a center for banking. Many wealthy merchants found their homes in Laodicea. Important trade routes ran through Laodicea leading to Ephesus, Sardis and Smyrna, which added to the importance and prosperity of the city. The affluence of the city was also illustrated by an incident in 62 B.C.E., when the proconsul Flaccus

seized more than 20 pounds of gold that was being sent by Jews in Laodicea to the Temple in Jerusalem. The amount not only reflects a large Jewish population in Laodicea, but also confirms their wealth.

During the Roman period, Laodicea flourished. This assessment is supported not only by ancient literary sources but also by the current archaeological work at the site. The remains that are being uncovered at Laodicea exhibit a city that was furnished

NORTHERN THEATER. Laodicea has two theaters: a western one dated to the Hellenistic period and a larger, northern one from the second century C.E. The northern theater (below) has a view of Hierapolis across the Lycus Valley. With a diameter of more than 400 feet, this structure could hold 20,000 attendees.



with a level of opulence seldom seen outside of capital cities. For a mid-sized city, this was remarkable.

Surface surveys were initially conducted at Laodicea by the Italians in the mid-1990s, and preliminary work at the site followed. In 2002, however, the site was assigned to the Turkish authorities, and the head of the archaeology department at the local Pamukkale University, Celal Şimşek, has directed work at the site since then. With the help of students at the university, the excavations at Laodicea have progressed rapidly (all year long). Additionally,

Şimşek has assembled a team of 15 archaeologists, along with eight restoration specialists, three architects and a number of master craftsmen who specialize in stonework and masonry. Alongside the excavations, restorations and reconstructions on site are proceeding in short order.

Having visited Laodicea every year for the past 19 years, I have seen the resurrection of this city from the first dig in 2003 to its current state.

Many of the ancient city's main streets were supplied with a subsurface drainage system and were flanked by colonnaded porticoes. The city was outfitted with at least five decorative fountains (nymphaea) and an elaborate water distribution system. It had four public bath complexes and five agoras. Laodicea had six city gates and two monumental gates, an odeon (small theater) or bouleuterion (town council house), two theaters and the largest stadium in Anatolia. The city boasted several temples and as many as 20 churches and chapels. In short, Laodicea was affluent and exceeded most cities of its size in terms of monumental structures and sumptuous assets.

These structures were almost all damaged or destroyed by earthquakes. In 17 C.E., a 7.5 magnitude earthquake centered in Sardis significantly damaged Laodicea. The city was rebuilt. However, in 60 C.E., a 7.0 magnitude earthquake centered in Laodicea caused even greater damage. Laodicea was offered imperial assistance by Roman emperor Nero, but the proud city refused the benefactions and rebuilt the city out of its own resources. Several more earthquakes rocked the area in the following centuries. Finally, after Laodicea was hit with another devastating earthquake in the early seventh century during the reign of Byzantine emperor Phocas (r. 602–610), the citizens abandoned the site and relocated elsewhere.⁸

Most of the remains visible today date from the second to the seventh centuries C.E.

THE BEAST OF REVELATION. The Roman emperor Domitian was not a friend to Christians. During his reign (81–96 C.E.), he proclaimed himself a god and demanded that his subjects worship him. Although Jews were exempt from this stipulation, Christians were not. The Book of Revelation, which was written during Domitian's reign, chronicles some of the strain this put on the Christian church. Those who would not worship Domitian—"the image of the beast" (Revelation 13:15)—were killed, and those who refused to take the mark of the beast (Revelation 13:16–17) were not permitted to buy or sell goods. To preserve their wealth and lives, many in the Laodicean church compromised their Christian faith, which caused the author of the apocalypse to call them "lukewarm" (Revelation 3:16).





HOME CHAPEL. About 20 churches and chapels have been found in Laodicea. Some of these structures used to be private houses, such as the home pictured above with a peristyle courtyard that was converted into a chapel.

The church at Laodicea was addressed in the last letter to the seven churches of the apocalypse (Revelation 3:14–22), where it is described as lukewarm—neither hot nor cold. Moreover, the church was noted as being wealthy. This corresponds with what is known about the city during this time. The letter evidently quotes the views of some of the Laodicean Christians: “I am rich and have become wealthy and have need of nothing” (Revelation 3:17). In response, the author exclaimed, “You are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (Revelation 3:17). Evidently money was an issue in the Laodicean church.

The Book of Revelation was written near the end of the first century during the reign of Roman emperor Domitian, who was the first emperor openly to proclaim himself a living god. This greatly angered the Roman senate and many citizens who believed that Domitian had gone over the top with his arrogance and megalomania. Emperor worship was common in the Roman Empire, but it was believed that the emperors became gods only at their death (apotheosis). Writing not long after Domitian’s

death, Suetonius asserted that Domitian had invested himself with the titles “our Lord and our God”—two titles that the Christians reserved for Jesus. Domitian’s authoritarian leadership, coupled with his perceived wickedness and arrogance, led the senate to issue a decree of *memoriae damnatio* following his assassination. This decree condemning the memory of Domitian required cities, towns and villages across the empire to destroy statues of Domitian and to remove his name from inscriptions.

The demand to participate in the imperial cult was chiefly enforced by local officials. The cities of Asia vied for imperial benefactions, and those cities that demonstrated their commitment and loyalty to the emperors stood to benefit most from the honors and patronage of the emperor. This would translate into funds for civic improvements but also into prestigious distinctions that the emperor could confer upon the city. Paramount among these recognitions was the honor of being named a *neokoros* of the emperor. A *neokoros* was considered the guardian of an imperial temple dedicated to the emperor. Inscriptions from the large, prestigious cities of Asia (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon) boasted of the many times they had received the honor. Coins minted in Laodicea indicate that this mid-sized city was also given the honor of an imperial temple for Domitian.



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As part of the Pax Romana, the staunchly monotheistic Jews in the cities of the Mediterranean world were exempt from the requirements of emperor worship. As long as Christianity was considered a sect within Judaism, the Christians in these cities were likewise exempt from emperor worship. However, as time progressed, this policy was reassessed. By the end of the first century, the percentage of Jews in the Christian churches declined as vast numbers of Gentiles flocked to the faith. During the reign of Domitian, the bulk of the Christian population was Gentile, and by this time the church had separated from the synagogue. Consequently, the exemption from emperor worship

CHURCH OF LAODICEA. Dated to the beginning of the fourth century C.E., the Church of Laodicea spanned a whole city block. It measured 45 by 42 yards, which made it the largest church in Laodicea. The church faced east (opposite, top) and was decorated with marble floors. In the middle of the nave is the speaker's ambo (podium; opposite, bottom). A bema (platform) and an altar, along with decorated chancel screens, sat at the far eastern end of the Church of Laodicea's nave. Below the altar, archaeologists found a water basin and miniature bottles, which suggest that holy water was bottled and given to pilgrims.

LAODICEA'S BAPTISTERY. The baptistery of the Church of Laodicea features a cross-shaped font. Measuring about 12 by 10.5 feet, the font has steps on its east and west sides that led down to a 5-foot-wide pool.

was rescinded for Christians, and these Christians were now expected to participate in the imperial festivals and emperor worship.

The difficulties that this placed upon the Christians of Asia were expressed in detail throughout the Book of Revelation. Those who refused to worship the image of the beast (the emperor) were killed. Christians could no longer buy or sell unless they had taken the mark of the beast (Revelation 13). The pressure upon rich Christians to maintain their wealth was intense. Since a great deal of Laodicea's wealth depended upon trade, the Christian merchants were in a quandary. Would they cooperate with the imperial cult and maintain their trade associations, or would they forswear Domitian and reaffirm their faith in Christ? Many of the Laodicean Christians compromised their faith in such ways that the writer of the apocalypse could say, "I will spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:16).

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Laodicea

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Christians in all seven churches of the apocalypse were faced with this dilemma. Individual churches responded variously. The rebukes and commendations in Revelation's letters to the seven churches illustrate the assorted reactions of the congregations. The response to the church in Smyrna was quite the opposite of the response to Laodicea. The church in Smyrna was commended for maintaining its faith in the face of opposition: "I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich" (Revelation 2:9). Here it seems the economic sanctions on the church were severe, yet they maintained faith and were encouraged with spiritual riches. Still, it is important to recognize that the wealthy Laodicean merchants seemingly had more to lose. One might recall the words of Jesus: how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom (Matthew 19:24).

After the reign of Domitian, the city of Laodicea continued to flourish until the early seventh century when the city was abandoned. During that time Christianity likewise thrived in Laodicea—moving beyond the pronouncement from the Book of Revelation. The city was named a bishopric, and sometime between 342 and 381, an important council, the Council of Laodicea, was held in the city. Over the centuries many churches were built, and several of the wealthy homes with peristyle courts were converted into chapels and used as churches. Archaeologists today have identified about 20 ancient churches and chapels throughout Laodicea. The largest and most magnificent is the Church of Laodicea, centrally located east of Temple A. This temple, dated to the second century C.E., was originally dedicated to the gods Apollo, Artemis and Aphrodite but was later dedicated to the Roman imperial family.

Archaeologists date the Church of

Laodicea to the first quarter of the fourth century, shortly after the Edict of Milan. Şimşek, the director of excavations at Laodicea, makes the bold claim: "It is the earliest and best-preserved religious monument of Christendom built after the Edict of Milan issued by Constantine the Great in 313 C.E."⁹

Measuring 45 by 42 yards, the Church of Laodicea took up an entire city block. The church was a three-aisled basilica with the main apse facing east. Five more apses ran the length of the church on both the north and south. The floors of the narthex, nave, baptistery and apses were paved with marble in the *opus sectile* style.* The remaining floors were decorated with geometric and floral mosaics.

An ambo (podium) was located in the center of the church in the middle of the nave. This was almost 20 feet long

*See Frankie Snyder, Gabriel Barkay and Zachi Dvira, "What the Temple Mount Floor Looked Like," *BAR*, November/December 2016.

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and had a staircase on both the east and west. In the northeastern corner of the church, a squared baptistery was located measuring 18 feet per side. In the center of the room, a cross-shaped baptismal font was constructed measuring about 12 by 10.5 feet. Three steps on both the east and west led down 3 feet into a sunken pool around 5 feet in diameter.

At the eastern end of the nave, the main apse was preceded by a bema (the primary speaker's platform) with a centrally placed altar. Underneath the altar, archaeologists discovered a small water basin and terracotta pipes bringing water from Laodicea's water system. Additionally, several miniature bottles were found here, which led the archaeologists to conclude that holy water was distributed to pilgrims at the church.

One hopes that this water was not lukewarm. ☞

¹ Celal Şimşek, "A Menorah with a Cross Carved on a Column of Nymphaeum A at Laodicea ad Lycum," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 19 (2006), pp. 343–346.

² David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*. PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 528; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), p. 783.

³ The route would have gone north of the Messogis Mountains and connected with the Cayster River valley leading to Ephesus.

⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, p. 667.

⁵ Acts 19:9 declares that during Paul's lengthy stay—for more than two years—in Ephesus on his third mission, the apostle established a school for the training of his disciples. This school, called the School of Tyrannus, operated for two years until Paul's departure from Ephesus. The school operated in quarters provided by a patron named Tyrannus. An inscription bearing the name of Tyrannus has been found in Ephesus and is currently on display in the Ephesus Museum. Disciples trained at the school were sent out into the surrounding cities, towns and villages with the gospel message "so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).

⁶ Paul described him as "our beloved fellow bondservant" and as "a faithful servant of Christ on your behalf" (Colossians 1:7).

⁷ At the conclusion of Paul's letter to the Colossians, the apostle expanded his account of Epaphras: "I bear him witness that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis" (Colossians 4:13). From this statement, it is logical to assume that Epaphras had a hand in the evangelism of Laodicea and Hierapolis in addition to Colossae.

⁸ *The Sibylline Oracle* (supposedly written by the Sibyl at Cumae during the first century B.C.E.—but heavily interpolated by Jews, Christians and others—offers this observation: "Stalwart Laodicea, a quake will one day topple and level you, but you will stand rebuilt as a city" (4.107). Another of the oracles is more provocative: "But when a destructive man comes from Italy, then Laodicea, dashed down headlong, beautiful town of the Carians by the wonderful waters of Lycus, you will be silent, bemoaning a concealed parent" (3.470). It is not known when or by whom these statements were written, but the second one seems to echo Christian notions of the antichrist. Paul wrote about the "man of lawlessness, the son of destruction" (2 Thessalonians 2:3), and this figure plays an important role in the Book of Revelation.

⁹ Celal Şimşek, *Church of Laodicea: Christianity in the Lykos Valley* (Denizli: Denizli Metropolitan Municipality, 2015).

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Bechar



Winn Leith



Weksler-Bdolah

The Virgin Mary

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and Augustine, who did not have much to say about Mary or, in the case of Tertullian, even criticized her for lack of faith! Historians like Ramsay MacMullen have shown that the Christianity of the common people could be quite different from elite Christianity,⁹ and that recognition recently led Stephen Shoemaker to suggest, very plausibly, that devotion to Mary could have been a natural outgrowth of the popular Christian cult of martyrs.¹⁰ Shoemaker's theory is supported by the invocation of Mary along with angels, martyr saints and Jesus in the texts of early Christian magical amulets in the form of hundreds of small papyri (and the occasional inscription on metal). These give a vivid picture of popular Christian piety, practiced with no apparent compunction despite vehement condemnation of amulet use by "Church Fathers" such as John Chrysostom in the fourth century. Papyrus Oxyrhynchus VIII 1151 is representative of such an amulet, carrying a spell to keep a woman named Joannia from harm.¹¹ This papyrus