

## Artemis of the Ephesians

Artemis (pronounced ahr´tuh-mis) was a goddess widely worshiped in antiquity throughout the Hellenistic and Roman world. Although identified with the Greek Artemis (and the Roman Diana), the sister of Apollo, the Ephesian Artemis had little in common with those deities of classical mythology. She was more like the ancient Anatolian and Asian mother goddess known also as Cybele. Above all, she was a patroness of nature and fertility.

The worship of some sort of mother goddess in this region antedated the settlement of Greeks in the area (ca. 1000 BCE). Acts 19:35 refers to a “sacred stone that fell from the sky” (ESV), possibly a meteorite, which might have been connected with this ancient cult.

By New Testament times, the goddess of the Ephesians had assumed a distinctive image: the upper region of her body was covered with numerous breasts (or possibly eggs), and she wore a turret crown and a long skirt with bands of animals and birds in relief. She was often accompanied by dogs or stags on either side, probably due to the syncretism with the original Greek Artemis.

The earliest Greek shrine to Artemis consisted of two simple platforms, but around 600 BCE the Cretan architect Chersiphron constructed a massive and impressive temple, known throughout the world as the Artemision. It took approximately one hundred years to

complete; by 500 BCE it measured 375 by 180 feet and had 60-foot marble columns. Then in 356 BCE this glorious temple burned to the ground, somewhat ominously some would say, on the very night that Alexander the Great was born.

The architect Dinocrates soon began a new Artemision, which was completed around 250 BCE. Even more glorious than its predecessor, it was regarded at the time of Jesus as one of the “seven wonders of the world” (as was the Jewish temple in Jerusalem). Certainly the Artemision is what put Ephesus on the map for many Romans, and by the time Paul visited the city, it had stood for three hundred years as the symbol of Ephesian prosperity and national pride.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians makes no mention of Artemis or of her temple, but the book of Acts tells of Paul preaching so effectively that many Ephesians feared interest in Artemis could wane. In particular, members of the guild of silversmiths (led by a certain Demetrius) were afraid that their trade of making silver shrines of Artemis would be jeopardized (19:23–27). Opinion varies concerning just what these shrines may have been, as nothing quite like this has been found.

The Goths destroyed the Artemision in 263 CE. Practically nothing of it remains today.