Introduction

Leaving his beloved teacher Origen behind in Caesarea Maritima about the year 240, bound for his distant home in the province of Pontus, Gregory of Neocaesarea (Niksar) turned to a catastrophic flight of rhetoric:[1]

> I may be going to prosecute no safe journey, as it sometimes fares with one who quits some safe and peaceful city; and it is indeed but too likely that, in journeying, I may fall into the hands of robbers, and be taken prisoner, and be stripped and wounded with many strokes, and be cast forth to lie half-dead somewhere.

Many miles of road lay ahead of him. Edward Gibbon would say of the Roman roads of the Antonine age that they 'united the subjects of the most distant provinces by an easy and familiar intercourse';[2] but however 'easy and familiar' these roads supposedly were, cities were much safer.

For the modern historians of the early churches, cities have had a similar appeal. Christianity, Thomas A. Robinson notes, 'was, supposedly, an *urban* religion'.[3] Noting how widespread this view is ('almost every recent scholar of the early church' has held it),[4] Robinson cites powerful names – Ramsay MacMullen and W.H.C. Frend – before naming Wayne A. Meeks (in *The First Urban Christians*) as the historian 'primarily responsible for the now near-universal assumption of the urban character of early Christianity'.[5]

[1] Gregory Thaumaturgus *In Originem Oratio Panegyrica* 16.
[2] Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* vol. 1, ch. 2.
[3] Robinson, *Who Were the First Christians?*, 15.
[4] Robinson, *Who Were the First Christians?*, 15.
[5] Robinson, *Who Were the First Christians?*, 17.

Robinson has snatched away the comfort of the urban thesis. The idea that at the time of the Edict of Milan (313) some 10 per cent of the population of the Roman empire was Christian, 6 million persons out of a population of 60 million, has been (he observes) commonly put forward as a working assumption for the size of the Christian movement. But the Roman empire was largely rural, with as few as 10 per cent of the population living in cities. If the rural Christian population approximated to zero, the cities would then have to be thought to be (at least) largely Christian – which ample evidence shows that they were not.[6] Therefore, the numbers usually cited in recent work for the size of the Christian population cannot stand; and neither can the claim of no substantial number of Christians in rural areas. The model normally drawn on in studying the growth of early Christianity, therefore, is no longer plausible. Like Gregory, the historian must leave the 'safe and peaceful city' behind.

This book, *Christianizing Asia Minor: Conversion, Communities, and Social Change in the Pre-Constantinian Era*, is admittedly an urban book, but in a special sense. It makes a supposed periphery into the centre, and moves the focus away from the cities of the west coast of Asia Minor and its immediate hinterland. The origins of Christianity in Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia, have been expounded at monumental length by Paul Trebilco,[7] whose work need not be duplicated; while Colin Hemer's *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* remains a definitive discussion of the cities of Revelation 2–3 and their churches.

At the heart of this book, therefore, is the up-country development of Asian Christianity in Phrygia and neighbouring inland regions, from the first century to the time of Constantine. As a corollary of its focus on one region within Rome's Asian realm, the book must deal with smaller and less important cities than Ephesus, or than most of the seven churches in Revelation. They do not measure up to the thirty-one cities which Rodney Stark examines in his *Cities of God*: cities chosen for his study because they had a population of 30,000 or more in the year 100;[8] Phrygia, as will become clear, was a place where a 'paper-thin façade of civic institutions and urbanization'[9] had been overlaid on something much less economically advanced. Its cities were barely a blip on the metropolitan radar.

[6] Robinson, *Who Were the First Christians?*, 19.
[7] Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*. [8] Stark, *Cities of God*, 34–5.
[9] Thonemann, 'Phrygia: An Anarchist History', 3.

Phrygia, then, even urban Phrygia, was a different kind of place from the Roman world of Stark's thirty-one cities. It had a distinctive history. Long before the time of the Roman empire, in the sixth century BC, when a Persian takeover steamrolled the archaic state built by Midas and others, Phrygia was transformed into 'a post-literate, post-urban, highly fragmented, cellular agro-pastoral society'.[10] Cities established later by Greeks and Macedonians had little impact on the overall pattern of settlement, and in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (Peter Thonemann argues on the basis of a sociologically informed reading), Phrygia 'can only be understood as a "post-state" zone: a former centre which has ... become a periphery' – one where organizational weakness made the people vulnerable to slave-raiding.[11] But for those people there were compensations, too: 'egalitarian social institutions, little internal stratification, effective local autonomy ... the certainty of never having to pay tax to anyone'.[12] Thonemann takes pains to put the best face on the situation, and speaks of it (with some appearance of reservation) as a path 'chosen' by Phrygians:[13] and yet the value to Phrygians of the compensations might be questioned – as might the applicability of the idea of 'choice'.

Phrygia was diverse. There were cities, few of them long established, with buildings, civic institutions, and their own bronze coinages;[14] there were imperial and private estates – between which the highlands were divided;[15] and there were peripheral areas which were still available for slave-raiding, even when Phrygia had long been under Roman government. But change came to this 'highly fragmented ... agro-pastoral society' in the Roman period. As Christoph Schuler says, the urbanization of the interior of Asia Minor (including Phrygia) was progressing as the Roman imperial era began, and a side effect was 'a massive increase in

[10] Thonemann, 'Phrygia: An Anarchist History', 3.
[11] Within the Roman world, Phrygian slaves were common. As W.V. Harris observes, 'The great source' [of slaves] 'was Asia Minor, with every region there, except perhaps the most prosperous parts of *provincia Asia* itself, being exploited for this purpose. Texts are numerous: over and over again we hear of the typical slave as a Cappadocian or a Phrygian' ('Towards a Study of the Roman Slave Trade', 122).
[12] Thonemann, 'Phrygia: An Anarchist History', 15.
[13] A path 'consciously or unconsciously chosen' (Thonemann, 'Phrygia: An Anarchist History', 4); 'the Phrygians' choice [if such it was]' (15).
[14] Thonemann, 'Phrygia: An Anarchist History', 38.
[15] Thonemann, 'Phrygia: An Anarchist History', 5.

the production of inscriptions' in rural areas[16] – a change without which much of the evidence used in this book never would have existed.

Evidence in that category is relatively abundant, and provides illuminating insights into life as it was lived from about the first century onward. For example, the data relating to the angel-cult in Asia discussed in Chapter 9 are almost all epigraphical, and the practices and ideas which can be inferred would have stayed virtually unknown if the inscriptions had not been preserved. There remain traps, however, which one must be careful not to fall into.

In pre-Christian Phrygia, people who were burdened with their sins would seek divine help in getting free of guilt. Two substantial corpora of inscriptions – if validly seen as separate – provide interesting data about religious practice in Phrygia and neighbouring territories. One, centred on the temple of Apollo Lairbenos, 18 kilometres north-east of the Phrygian city of Hierapolis (Pamukkale) in the Lycus valley,[17] records 'manumissions' and confessions by worshippers – but the records of 'manumissions' do not record ordinary emancipations of slaves by their owners.[18] The confessions, often expressed in the first person, record the name of an individual and a wrong which he or she has committed, and then say that he or she was punished (by the god); the text ends by warning the reader not to disregard the god.[19] The offences referred to are often oath-breaking, entering sacred precincts while in a ritually impure condition, or sexual transgressions.

An equal or greater concern with wrongdoing appears in the second of the corpora of inscriptions referred to above, the *Beichtinschriften* corpus, rather more than 120 inscriptions dating from the first to third centuries, mostly from inland Lydia, Mysia, and Phrygia. In many cases these inscriptions tell stories of the same kinds of transgressions recorded in the Apollo Lairbenos series (which, depending on how one slices the data, could be regarded as a subset of the *Beichtinschriften* series): breaches of oaths, improper activities in sacred places, sexual misconduct.

In *Beichtinschrift* 1, for example, a stele from the first or second century from Akçaavlu near Magnesia on the Maeander (Manisa),

[16] Schuler, 'Inscriptions and Identities', 90.
[17] Miller, 'Apollo Lairbenos', 49.
[18] Kevin M. Miller says that 'it was not a manumission in any normal sense of the word', and argues that the 'manumitted' children 'may have been doing service in other households … under conditions similar to apprenticeship or indenture', adding that '[a] καταγραφή clearly brought about some improvement in status' ('Apollo Lairbenos', 59–60).
[19] Miller, 'Apollo Lairbenos', 60–7.

Meidon, son of Menander, and his servants drank and ate unsacrificed meat, on the premises of Zeus Trosou, and then Meidon was struck dumb for three months; however, the god appeared to him in dreams and commanded him to set up an inscribed stele – after which, Meidon was able to speak again.[20]

The act of setting up the inscription, in that case, was conceived by the dedicator as atonement for his transgression – and gaining forgiveness may also be taken as part of the motive for setting up the inscription in the many cases where a divine demand for an inscription is not recorded. Other offerings, including animal sacrifices, might also be needed, as at *Beichtinschrift* 5, where Theodorus has to offer a sheep, a partridge, a mole, a piglet, a tuna fish, a chicken, a sparrow, a pigeon, a measure of barley-wheat mixture, a jug of wine, and a measure of wheat, in atonement for his sexual misdemeanours.[21] The *Beichtinschriften* appear across a wide swathe of Asian territory, and are associated with a range of sanctuaries and deities.

Christianity, perhaps more than most religions, is concerned with sin and atonement for sin. This is perhaps why there has been a tendency to explain the conversion of Phrygia to Christianity with reference to an ingrained impulse to confess sin and achieve reconciliation with God, evident in the *Beichtinschriften*. The idea is that ethnic communities where people were conscious of sin and inclined to explain their misfortunes – such as Meidon's inability to speak – as divine punishment for that sin, would, more easily than others, be attracted to a religion in which a central teaching is that 'God … commands all people everywhere to repent.'[22]

This theory in some cases has been linked with an argument which finds the cult and the castrated priests of Cybele and Attis to be vital as background to the Montanists' understanding of Christian worship and prophecy.[23] But this argument leans too heavily, for the explanations which it generates, on a stereotypical and ethnocentric view of the Phrygian character. Robinson finds these 'slippery slopes to be playing on'.[24] The best and fullest discussion of this kind of 'Phrygianism' – at least of which I am aware – is in my colleague Bernard Doherty's regrettably unpublished doctoral dissertation.[25]

[20] Petzl, *Beichtinschriften* no. 1, pp. 1–2. [21] Petzl, *Beichtinschriften* no. 5, pp. 7–11.
[22] Acts 17.30. [23] Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 24–32.
[24] Robinson, *Who Were the First Christians?*, 185–6.
[25] Doherty, 'Montanist Milieu', 266–306.

The first Christian missionaries in Asia headed inland. In 49 or 50 (Acts 16.6), and again in 53 or 54 (Acts 18.23), Paul the Apostle travelled in Phrygia, in the course of preaching the gospel of Jesus. Phrygia is mentioned each time in connection with Galatia. In Acts 16, 'They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia' (τὴν Φρυγίαν καὶ Γαλατικὴν χώραν);[26] but in Acts 18 the order is reversed: 'he departed and went ... through the region of Galatia and Phrygia' (τὴν Γαλατικὴν χώραν καὶ Φρυγίαν). It is not likely that any significance attaches to which place name is given first. These two verses, however, have been used as data in the long-standing debate between proponents of the North Galatian and South Galatian theories of who the intended recipients of the Epistle to the Galatians were – a debate about which there will be more to say in due course. The northern and southern question about Galatia, while not in itself representing core business, provides a way into a key matter of definition for this book: the matter of where and what 'Phrygia' was.

Stephen Mitchell, writing in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, describes Phrygia as a 'large and ill-defined geographical region which stretched across much of west central Anatolia'.[27]

In the great days, the days of King Midas (known to the Assyrians as Mita, king of the Mushki) in the eighth and early seventh centuries BC, Phrygian power extended widely; but in the period of the Roman high empire, the region attested as Phrygian had shrunk.[28] Dorylaeum (Eskişehir) was Phrygian, and Bithynia began further north. Proceeding anticlockwise on the map in Figure 1, the upper Hermus valley was Phrygian, with Lydia lying downstream and to the west; 'Phrygia on the Hellespont' was an antiquarian memory.[29] Further south, Colossae and Laodicea,

[26] Calder renders this phrase as 'the territory which was both Phrygia and Galatia' (*MAMA* 7. xii), and glosses, 'that part of Galatic Phrygia which ran along the Pisidian border' – meaning by 'Galatic Phrygia' the part of Phrygia which was in the province of Galatia (see Figure 1).

[27] Hornblower and Spawforth, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*[4], 1142: this entry is drawn on throughout the following paragraph.

[28] Roller, 'Legend of Midas', 299–301. Roller, following M.J. Mellink, argues that the Mushki (in south-eastern Anatolia) and the Phrygians (in central Anatolia) were two different peoples, both of whom Midas controlled. Accordingly, he infers that the Phrygian inscription naming Midas at Tyana in Cappadocia (Friedrich, *Kleinasiatische Sprachdenkmäler*, 127–8, no. 19) was in Mushki territory, and so is not evidence that Phrygian was spoken as far south-east as Tyana.

[29] 'they use the term Phrygia for the Troad because, after Troy was sacked, the Phrygians, whose territory bordered on the Troad, got the mastery over it': Strabo *Geography* 10.3.22. Translation from Jones, *The Geography of Strabo* vol. 5.

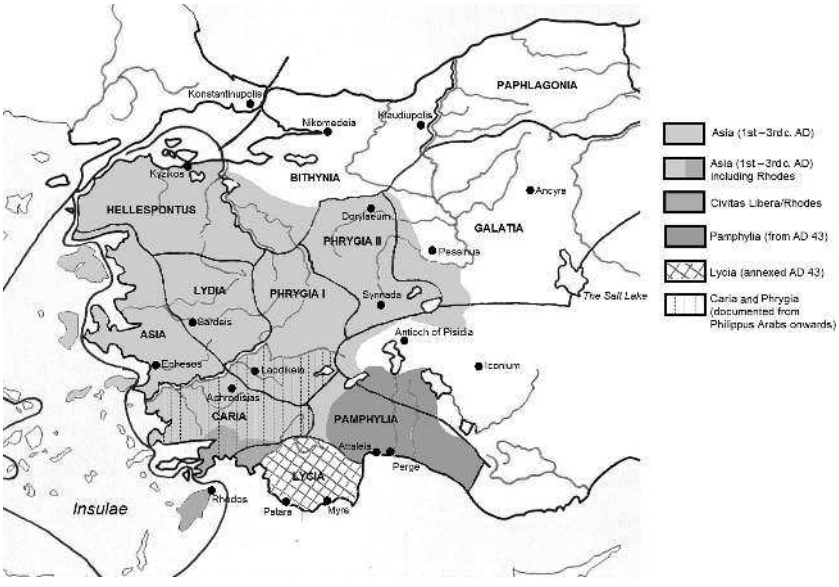

Figure 1 Roman provinces in Western Asia before and after Diocletian.
Map drawn by Jenni Irving

17 kilometres apart on the Lycus river, were Phrygian; but Laodicea could from time to time be said to belong to Caria or Lydia.[30] To the south-east, Xenophon once wrote that Iconium (Konya) was the 'last [i.e. south-easternmost] city of Phrygia':[31] 'on a natural and cultural frontier' (as Mitchell says[32]), its identity was complex. References relevant to the Roman period describe it as belonging to Lycaonia or even Pisidia,[33] but in 256 Firmilian, bishop of Caesarea Mazaca (Kayseri), in his letter to Cyprian, wrote of Iconium as 'a place in Phrygia' (*Phrygiae locus*).[34] Antioch of Pisidia (Yalvaç), 124 kilometres west-north-west of Iconium, was clearly within the Phrygian *Kulturkreis*. The eastern end of Phrygia stretched as far as the Salt Lake (Tuz Gölü).

[30] Laodicea on the Lycus in Caria: Philostr. *VS* 1.530.5; in Lydia: Herodian *General Prosody* 3,1.275.1.
[31] Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.2.19. Translation adapted from Brownson, *Xenophon III* rev. edn.
[32] Mitchell, 'Iconium and Ninica', 411.
[33] Iconium 'a city of Lycaonia': Herodian *General Prosody* 3, 1.363.27; Pisidia: Basil of Caesarea *Epistles* 138.2.21.
[34] Cyprian *Epistles* 75.7.5.

The poet Claudian, writing in the early fifth century and telling the story of the revolt (399–400) of Tribigild and his Ostrogoths, defines in ten brisk lines the land where they had been settled before the conflict:[35]

> That part of Phrygia which lies towards the north beneath the cold constellation of the Wain borders on Bithynia; that towards the sunset on Ionia, and that towards the sunrise on Galatia. On two sides are the Lydians with oblique boundaries while the fierce Pisidians hem it in to the south. All these peoples once formed one nation and had one name: they were of old called the Phrygians, but (what changes does time not bring about?) after the reign of a king Maeon, were known as Maeones. Then the Greeks settled on the shores of the Aegean, and the Thyni from Thrace, cultivated the region now called Bithynia.

These lines give late antique Phrygia a shape essentially the same as that described above for the days of the high empire. Lydia's shape, its eastern border first running north-west to south-east, then turning south-west, is alluded to with the phrase *utrimque propinqui finibus obliquis Lydi* ('On two sides are the Lydians with oblique boundaries').[36] The boundaries are indeed 'oblique' (see Figure 1), whether or not Claudian understood with precision that a bird could fly due north from Laodicea and cross into Lydia, but continue in the same direction and be back in Phrygia further on.[37]

The Phrygian language, which the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichus (664–610 BC) believed to be the language of the most ancient people in the world (or so the priests of Ptah at Memphis told Herodotus),[38] was an Indo-European language closely related to Greek, and was used in Phrygia alongside Greek until the third century and later.[39] Prehistorically, as Claude Brixhe says, 'the Phrygians belonged to a single population-group out of which ultimately emerged the Greek, Thracian and Phrygian languages'[40] – and Phrygian people had migrated west to east, from Macedonia and Thrace into Asia, via Hellespontine Phrygia and to the Sangarios river basin, and then further, to the Anatolian plateau.[41]

In the second and third centuries, Phrygian-language curse formulae directed against anyone who might damage a tombstone or burial place

[35] Claud. *In Eutropium* 2.238–47; translation from Platnauer, *Claudian* vol. 1 (adapted).
[36] Lines 240–1. [37] Cf. Thonemann, *Maeander Valley*, 52. [38] Herodotus 2.2.1–5.
[39] Documentary evidence for the Phrygian language (collected in Orel, *Language of Phrygians*) consists of epigraphical texts from the eighth and seventh centuries BC ('paleo-Phrygian') and epigraphical texts from the second and third centuries AD ('neo-Phrygian') – the latter body of material produced almost a thousand years after the former.
[40] Brixhe, 'Personal Onomastics', 55. [41] Brixhe, 'Personal Onomastics', 55–7.

were carved as part of grave inscriptions whose texts were mostly in Greek (there are also a few extant gravestones carved wholly in Phrygian).[42] These inscriptions are found in eastern Phrygia and not in the central or western areas. It is difficult, nevertheless, to gauge what the difference was, linguistically, between areas where Phrygian was used in grave inscriptions and where it was not: its absence does not amount to proof that people were not speaking Phrygian in everyday life. Rick Strelan, following Brixhe, argued persuasively in 2011 that in the Lycus valley (in south-west Phrygia, at some distance from places where neo-Phrygian inscriptions have been found) it is probable that Phrygian was spoken[43] – and that 'for the majority in the Lycus Valley Greek was a second language'.[44]

Members of a Christian sect in Phrygia whose distinctive mark was praying with a forefinger placed against the nostril to show the depth of a devotee's penitence were called Tascodrugites,[45]

> for the following reason. Their word for 'peg' is 'tascus', and 'drungus' is their word for 'nostril' or 'snout'. And since they put their licking-finger, as we call it, on their nostril when they pray, for dejection, if you please, and would-be righteousness, some people have given them the name of Tascodrugians, or 'nose-pickers'.

These Tascodrugites formed part of the complex of sects connected with the New Prophecy (Montanism),[46] a Christian movement which will be discussed from Chapter 4 onwards, and which came into existence in the second half of the second century. Their Phrygian-derived name, even though probably given to them by others rather than by themselves, points towards the indigenous language being still spoken, at least by some people some of the time.

Greek, however, was the most widely spoken language in Roman Asia, and was used in nearly all educational and governmental contexts –

[42] The principal collection of neo-Phrygian texts is Haas, *Phrygische Sprachdenkmäler*.

[43] Strelan, 'Languages of the Lycus Valley', 97, citing Brixhe, who in 2002 argued ('Interactions', 254–5) that monolingual Phrygian speakers must have existed. In 1978, Elsa Gibson alluded to 'the erroneous view that Phrygian was revived and widely spoken in this period' [sc. the third century]: but in view of more recent work her stance on this point is no longer credible. Gibson, '*Christians for Christians' Inscriptions of Phrygia*, 96.

[44] Strelan, 'Languages of the Lycus Valley', 101.

[45] Epiphanius *Panarion* 48.14.4. Translation from Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*.

[46] 'Nose-peggers' (cf. Trevett, *Montanism*, 259–60) is without the invective force of Williams's 'nose-pickers'.

except the context of the army, whose language was Latin. And yet community languages might remain important – and not only in Phrygia, as is clear from the incident at Lystra where local people came to think Paul and Barnabas were Hermes and Zeus, and (speaking Lycaonian) began preparations for a sacrifice to them.[47]

In the case of Phrygian, William M. Calder argues that in some areas, the Celtic language spoken by Galatians drove it out. From the third century BC, Galatians had settled north-eastern Phrygia, he notes, and[48]

> The Galatian squirearchy and settlers maintained the use of Celtic and also of course, like all Anatolians, found it necessary to use Greek. But there was no place in Galatia for a third language, and Greek became the medium of intercourse first between the Galatians and their Phrygian subjects, and finally among the Phrygians themselves.

Calder's schematic pronouncement goes too far in positing 'no place ... for a third language', but hints usefully at the importance of relationships of power and land ownership in the way language use had been shaped before the Roman imperial period.

In 295, Diocletian and the other emperors who made up the Tetrarchy reorganized the provinces of their empire. In western Asia, in the diocese of Asiana, they created eleven smaller-size provinces, seven of which had territory belonging to the old province of Asia.[49] Among them were Phrygia I, also known as Phrygia Pacatiana, with its capital at Laodicea on the Lycus (Denizli), and Phrygia II, also known as Phrygia Salutaris, whose capital was Synnada (Şuhut). Nevertheless, even after Phrygia had become politically visible enough to supply the names of two Roman provinces, not all Phrygian communities were inside those provinces.

So it was, in the reign of Constantine, that the people of Orcistus came to petition the emperor to allow their town city status, and to sever it from the control of Nacolea, the city to which it had previously been subordinate. Orcistus, a Phrygian town, was in Galatia II,[50] but near its western border, while Nacolea was some 50 kilometres north-west, within Phrygia II Salutaris. An inscription preserves the exchange of correspondence between the local council of Orcistus, the Emperor Constantine, and Flavius Ablabius, a highly placed and still rising imperial official.[51] In

[47] Acts 14.11–14. [48] *MAMA* 7. xv.
[49] Within the diocese of Asiana, Insulae, Hellespontus, Asia, Lydia, and Caria, besides the Phrygias, came out of the old province of Asia; and besides, some territory from old Asia was reassigned to Bithynia, and some to Galatia Salutaris, both in the diocese of Pontica.
[50] Latitude: 39° 13' 18" N; Longitude: 31° 14' 34" E. [51] *MAMA* 7.305 (ICG 1292).