WHY should anybody be interested in Miletus, which is a ruined city in Turkey near the east coast of the Aegean Sea? (Figure 1) Today it consists of a jumble of stone blocks scattered over an area of low hills. (Figure 2) It does not make much of an impression on modern tourists, but in ancient times it was an important city with a busy harbour and colonies on the shores of the Mediterranean and Black Seas. In the sixth century BC it was a centre of Greek philosophy, and Anaximander of Miletus gave a foundation to astronomy by using geometry to represent the apparent motions of the heavenly bodies. But Miletus is of particular interest for Christians because in 57 AD it was visited by Saint Paul. He summoned the elders from the church at Ephesus and addressed all the
Christians there. His speech is recorded in Acts 20:18-35.

Miletus was one of the first cities to mint coins. They were of electrum, which was an alloy of gold and silver. It occurred naturally in the region and was found particularly in the dry river beds. The largest of these early electrum coins was a magnificent stater with a lion looking back on the obverse. It is dated to the period 600 to 550 BC. (Figure 3) The name ΜΙΛΗΤΟΣ (Miletos in Greek) does not occur on these early coins, but a lion looking back occurs on later coins and confirms their origin. The lion represented Miletus. Later in the 6th century small coins only of silver were minted at Miletus but still with a lion looking back on the obverse. (Figure 4) It is wonderful to think of the great Milesian philosophers like Anaximander handling these coins.

The coastal region which included Miletus and Ephesus was known as Ionia. (Figure 5) It had been colonized by Greeks from Athens who claimed to be descended from a hero called Ion. These Ionian Greeks prospered in their new home but when the Persian Empire expanded in the 6th century they came under Persian control. In 499 BC Aristagoras, the ruler of Miletus, led a revolt against the Persians, and with the support of Athens they were initially successful. They sacked Sardis, the capital of Lydia. A number of electrum staters with various images on the obverse appear at this time (Figure 6) and David Sear in Greek Coins and their Values, Volume 2, considered it likely that they were all minted at Miletus.

The Ionian Revolt was squashed in 494 BC when the Greeks were defeated in a naval battle near the island of Lade just offshore from Miletus. The Persians then sacked Miletus. They took the men to Mesopotamia and enslaved the women and children. In Athens the playwright Phrynichus wrote a tragedy about it, but when the play was performed in 494 BC the Athenians were so distressed that Phrynichus was fined 1000 drachmas. Gradually independence and prosperity returned to Miletus and in the 4th century...
tetradrachms as well as drachms and hemidrachms were minted. They all have Apollo on the obverse and a lion looking back at a star on the reverse. (Figure 7) The star represents Apollo who was for the Greeks the god of light and the sun. There was a famous shrine of Apollo at Didyma about ten miles south of Miletus. At the shrine there was an oracle who could foretell the future, and pilgrims came from all over the Greek world to see the god and consult the oracle, much to the economic benefit of Miletus. The name Didyma means ‘twin’, and Apollo was the twin of Artemis whose great temple at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

What is particularly interesting about these coins of Miletus is that they represent the ethos of the city, what the people thought their city meant in the world. Miletus was built on a promontory that extended out into a large bay and if you look at the map in Figure 8 you can see that the outline looks like a crouching lion. Look at it from the north-west and it becomes more apparent. Miletus is the crouching lion but why is it looking back at the sun? The reason is that Miletus was at the beginning of the Sacred Way that led to the temple of Apollo, the god of the sun.

The temple of Apollo at Didyma was famous not only in Asia Minor and Greece but throughout the Middle East, and the cult of Apollo could well have had an...
influence on early Christianity. In the Gospel of John, which was probably written at Ephesus, Jesus says that he is the light of the world (John 8:12). The Gospel of Mark was the first gospel to be written and it was symbolized by a lion, perhaps because like Miletus it was at the beginning of the way to God. In the Book of Revelation, written on the island of Patmos only 100 kilometres west of Miletus, Jesus himself is called a lion, the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

When Alexander the Great invaded the region in 334 BC the Milesians opposed him, but he besieged the city until they surrendered. He then established at Miletus one of his major mints producing the typical tetradrachms of Alexander with Heracles (Hercules to the Romans) on the obverse and Zeus on the reverse. (Figure 9) Alexander claimed to be descended from Heracles who was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman.

After the death of Alexander in 323 BC Miletus came under the control of Lysimachus, one of his generals. (Figure 10) The city prospered and in 313 BC building began on an enormous temple of Apollo at Didyma on the site of an earlier temple. Construction continued on and off in the following centuries and if it had been completed it would have been one of the wonders of the ancient world. (Figure 11) In 281 BC Lysimachus was killed in battle by Seleucus I, another of Alexander’s generals. Throughout the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC Miletus continued to mint silver and bronze coins with Apollo on the obverse and a lion looking back on the reverse. (Figures 12 and 13)

In 133 BC the region that included Miletus, Ephesus and Pergamum became the Roman province of Asia. No coins were minted at Miletus during the reigns of the first two Roman emperors, Augustus and Tiberius, but bronze and brass coins were minted there during the reigns of Caligula (37-41 CE), Claudius (41-54) and Nero (54-68). These coins are of particular interest to Christians because they would have circulated in the city when St Paul was there. On the reverse of one of Caligula’s coins there is an image of the idol that stood in the temple at Didyma. (Figure 14) It was a bronze statue made by a famous Greek

Figure 10 – Tetradrachm minted at Miletus from 295 to 275 BC. Price 2150. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 149, Lot 39)

Figure 11 – Entrance to the ruins of the temple of Apollo at Didyma. Notice the size of the man in the red shirt. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Radomil)

Figure 12 – Silver didrachm of Miletus from 225-190 BC. Magistrate Eusthenes. Sear 4506. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 63, Lot 493)

Figure 13 – Bronze coin of Miletus from 225-190 BC. Magistrate Poluxenos. Like Sear 4812 (Münzen & Medaillen, Auction 11, Lot 705)
sculptor, Canachus, in the 6th century. Although the idol has long since disappeared we can see it just as the pilgrims saw it after their long journey to Didyma. A similar image occurs on one of Claudius’s coins, but on one of Nero’s coins there is an image of the statue that stood in Apollo’s temple at Miletus. (Figure 15). It is called Apollo Delphinios, and the temple is called the Delphinion. The name refers to Apollo being associated with dolphins. According to Greek legend dolphins guarded the Greeks when they sailed to foreign lands. Paul would have seen the Delphinion because it was situated near where people landed in the main harbour which was called the Lion Harbour because it was guarded by two stone lions. The site of the Lion Harbour and the Delphinion is indicated on the map in Figure 8.

Paul probably did not enter any of the temples in Miletus because he was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem and he wanted to speak to the Christians, but what did he say? In Acts 20:23-24 he said, “I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”

Bronze coins were minted at Miletus by Trajan (98-117) and Hadrian (117-138) but Hadrian also minted large silver coins called cistophori, and some of these coins show Apollo in his temple at Didyma. (Figure 16) At Miletus Hadrian built a magnificent marble gate at the northern entrance to the southern agora (marketplace). It has been reconstructed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. (Figure 17) Subsequently bronze coins...
were minted on and off at Miletus by the Roman emperors until the time of Gallienus (253-268) when the provincial mints were closed and only certain cities such as Rome and Alexandria minted coins. One of the last coins minted at Miletus is a bronze coin of Salonina, the wife of Gallienus. (Figure 18)

Miletus was built on a promontory that extended into a bay, but the Maeander River emptied into the bay and it gradually silted up. Eventually the promontory was surrounded by dry land and the shore of the Aegean Sea was five miles to the west of Miletus. The present shoreline is shown in the map in Figure 19. Marshes created by the silting process became breeding grounds for mosquitoes causing malaria, and by the late Middle Ages there was only a poor village on the site. It was completely abandoned by the 17th century. Fortunately we have the coins that circulated there over the centuries to connect us with the people who proudly called Miletus home.

Figure 16 – Cistophorus of Hadrian showing Apollo in his temple at Didyma. (Roma Numismatics, Electronic Auction, Lot 648)

Figure 17 – Hadrian’s gate reconstructed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by José Luiz)

Figure 18 – Bronze coin of Salonina minted at Miletus. On the reverse there is a prize urn on a table. The inscription refers to the Pythian Games in honour of Apollo. (Numismatik Naumann, Auction 75, Lot 382)

Figure 19 – Map showing the present shore of the Aegean Sea. (Wikimedia Commons)