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## Paphos

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# LEXHAM BIBLE DICTIONARY



**LEXHAM**  
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**PAPHOS** (Πάφος, *Paphos*). A proconsular city on the southwest coast of Cyprus, founded in 320 BC. There actually were two ancient cities about 10 miles (16 km) apart: Nea Paphos (“New Paphos”), the setting of Acts 13:6–12, and Palaepaphos (“Old Paphos”), which was first inhabited during the fourth millennium BC.

### **Biblical Relevance**

Saul (Paul) and Barnabas visited Paphos, where they encountered the magician and false Jewish prophet Elymas (Bar-Jesus) and the proconsul Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:6–12). After setting sail from Seleucia, Saul and Barnabas arrived in Salamis, on the east coast of Cyprus. From there they traveled across the whole island down to Paphos, on the southwest coast. Sergius Paulus summoned them because he wanted to hear the word of God. Elymas tried to hinder them, in order to prevent the proconsul from becoming a believer. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul rebuked Elymas, who suddenly became blind. This manifestation of God’s power astonished the proconsul to the extent that he became a believer.

Several details in Luke’s account correspond with historical sources. Luke correctly identifies Cyprus as a proconsular province at the time of Saul and Barnabas’ visit. He also accurately presents Paphos as the proconsul’s place of residence (Hemer, *Book of Acts*, 108, 166).

### **History**

#### *Palaepaphos (Old Paphos)*

Palaepaphos was first inhabited in the Chalcolithic Age (around 3800–2300 BC). Greeks settled on the site in the 12th century BC, and between the eighth century and the beginning of the third, Paphos was the capital of a kingdom that shared its name. In the third century, Cyprus was conquered by the Ptolemies. When Nea Paphos was founded on the coast in 320 BC, the name “Old Paphos” was adopted to distinguish between the two cities.

Palaepaphos was an important religious center during antiquity, especially for the Aphrodite cult. The site where Aphrodite was believed to have come from the sea was nearby. The sanctuary at Palaepaphos became the preeminent place for worshiping Aphrodite in the Roman and Greek world (Maier, “Paphos, Old,” 1). Paphos is one of the few locations in antiquity where the place-name became strongly associated with its cult; Aphrodite was referred to as the *Paphia* (Maier, *Alt-Paphos*, 3).

When Nea Paphos was established, Palaepaphos lost both inhabitants and importance, even though its position as a religious center was unthreatened. A new sanctuary was erected around AD 100, possibly because of an earthquake. The long-lasting cult was ended with the outlawing of pagan religion in AD 391 (Maier, “Paphos, Old,” 1).

#### *Nea Paphos (New Paphos)*

Nea Paphos was founded as a result of Alexander’s conquest of the Achaemenid empire, which led to the dissolution of the kingdom of Paphia under the supervision of Nicocles (Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos*, 224). In 320 BC, Nicocles founded Nea Paphos (which came to be called simply “Paphos”), and the old city became known as Palaepaphos (Old Paphos).

The new city was located about 10 miles (16 km) northwest of Palaepaphos and remained the capital of Cyprus for over 500 years. The coastal location of Nea Paphos likely was driven by Palaepaphos’ lack of a decent harbor—a definite disadvantage as trade was flourishing in the

fourth century BC. Nea Paphos had a natural harbor, as well as close access to ship timber from nearby hills (Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos*, 224, 226).

#### *Roman Period*

In 58 BC, Cyprus was conquered by the Romans, and a proconsul was assigned to rule Nea Paphos. The twin cities of Palaepaphos and Nea Paphos remained the island's religious and political center up to the early fourth century AD. Writing in AD 40–41, the geographer Pomponius Mela praised the cities: “the most illustrious are Salamis, Paphos and Palaepaphos, where the natives assert that Venus first rose from the sea” (Pomponius Mela, *De chorographia*; Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos*, 249). Nea Paphos minted and issued all the province's coins and was one of the most important harbor cities on the island. Pompey stayed there briefly after being defeated at Pharsalus in 48 BC, and the future emperor Titus landed in Paphos in AD 69 for a brief stay before continuing to Palestine.

Paphos was repeatedly hit by earthquakes. After a quake in 15 BC, Augustus financed the city's rebuilding and granted it the name “Sebaste” (Augusta). Another earthquake struck in AD 76~77 (Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos*, 249–50). With each phase of rebuilding, Paphos became increasingly characterized by Roman-style architecture. In the time of Augustus, the geographer Strabo visited Paphos and remarked that it had “a harbour and beautifully built sanctuaries” (Strabo, *Geography*, 14.6; Maier and Karageorghis, *Paphos*, 250–51).

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