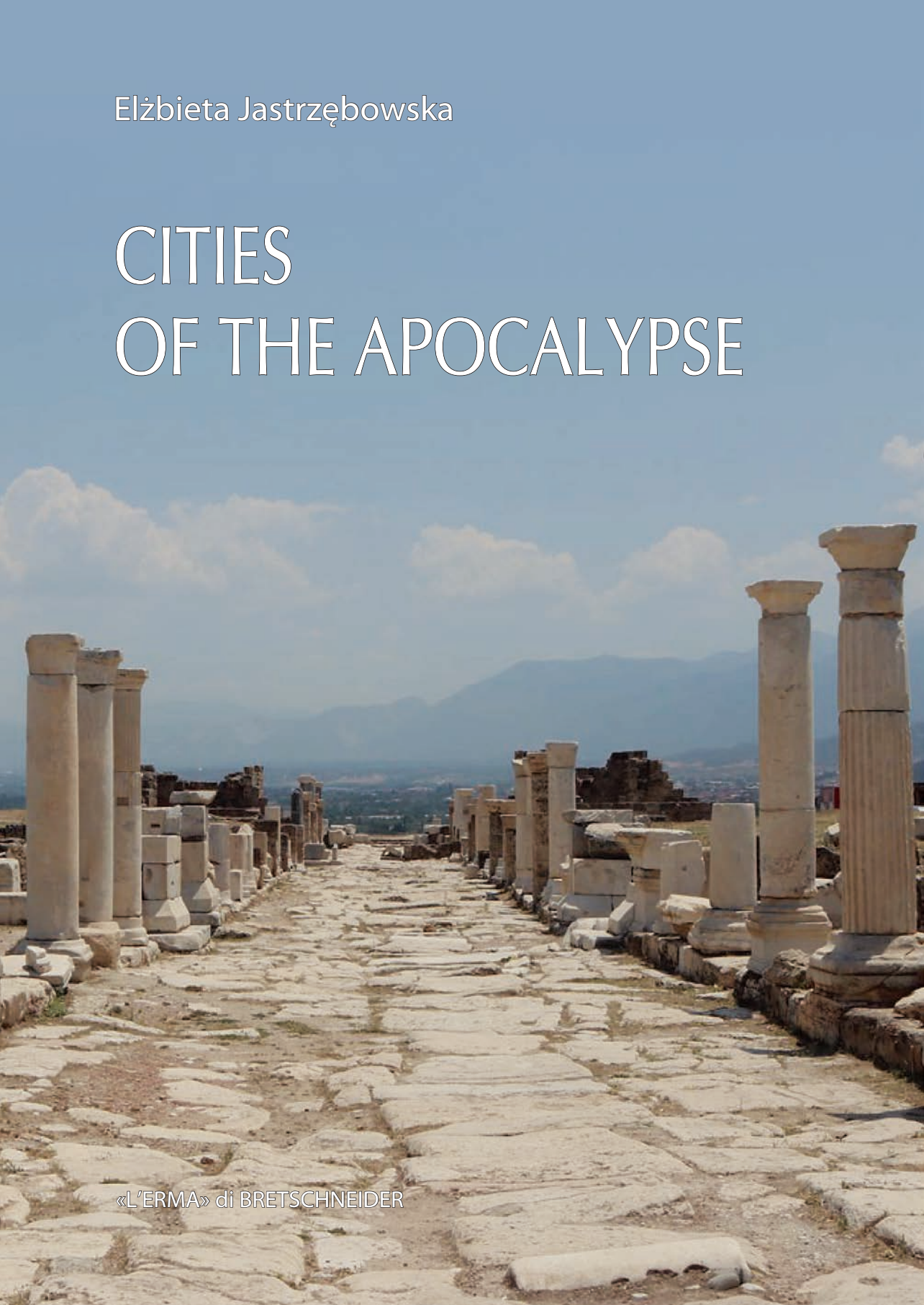


Elżbieta Jastrzębowska

CITIES OF THE APOCALYPSE

«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER



STUDIA
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Elżbieta Jastrzębowska

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«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER

Elżbieta Jastrzębowska
Cities of the Apocalypse

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A HISTORIAN'S PREFACE

John's Apocalypse is a combination of two literary genres well represented in the early Christian sources, letters to communities and apocalypses *sensu largo*: the so-called letters to the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (1.4-3.22) and the eschatological revelations which constitute the bulk of the Book (4.1-22.15). It is impossible to determine the exact relationship between the two parts, i.e. which was primary in its author's design, in terms both of chronology and importance. All that can be said with certainty is that whereas thanks to the second part the Apocalypse acquired in our civilisation the status of the inspired text *par excellence*, for a historian more precious is the first, one of a handful of contemporary sources for the process of the parting of the ways between the Church and the Synagogue, which finally gave Christianity an identity of its own.

The question very often asked about the second part, in the present volume as well, is why the author of the Apocalypse addressed his letters to seven Christian communities in Asia and why to these particular seven: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyateira, Sardes, Philadelphia and Laodicea. A quasi automatic answer to the first question – because of the symbolic value of seven – is not convincing, if only because its partisans are unable to explain persuasively what this symbolism would consist in. E.g. an assertion by S. Friesen, quoted by the author of this book (with a certain scepticism, and rightly so; see below), that «as a symbol in Revelation, the number seven represents perfection, wholeness, the divine order that defines the cosmos and history. Thus, the implication of writing to seven churches is that John's Revelation was intended for all the churches in the area [i.e. in Roman Asia]» (p. 00), strangely restricts (read: underestimates) the aims and ambitions of the creator of that incredibly powerful vision with its enormously rich theological message: if not exclusively to the immediate addressees, the seven churches, why shouldn't it have been directed to all the Christian communities? As for the second question, the stubbornly reiterated view that it had something to do with the imperial cult, of which the province of Asia was the cradle, is senseless. First, the imperial cult, aptly defined as a loyalty cult, completely deprived of the religious

element *stricto sensu*, became the main object of condemnation by the Christians (and the main reason of the latter's persecutions) only in the opinion of later epochs; second, the letters are concerned exclusively with internal problems of the seven churches, i.e. of the local Christian communities.

Now, those internal problems provide a sufficient, but also the most cogent explanation of reasons which urged the author (certainly not the Evangelist but one clearly belonging to his circle) to compose his seven messages. The descriptions of matters worthy of praise or censure are too particular from one church to another, and at the same time too specific and too well attested by other Christian writings of the period (sometimes as accusations, sometimes as quite the opposite...) to write them off as symbolic. Tirades against the followers of the teachings of Balaam in Pergamum (2.14) and the adherents of the "woman Jezebel" in Thyateira (2.20-23), accused of eating sacrificial meats and fornication (which means the same), give evidence of the still undiminished conflict over observance between Christians attached to some Jewish traditions and Pauline radicals, ostentatiously breaking alimentary taboos and ritual prescriptions of Judaism. References to "those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not" in Smyrna (2.9) and Philadelphia (3.9) signal doubled-edged problems with Christians of Jewish origin who decided to retain the status of Jews at the time of its redefinition after the destruction of the Temple and the institution of *fiscus Iudaicus*. Notices about Nicolaitans in the churches of Ephesus (2.6) and Pergamum (2.15) are the earliest testimony in the Christian context of designating a group whose teaching was considered unacceptable (at that time it is too early to speak of heretics; besides, we have no idea why the author of the Apocalypse hates them) with an appellation derived from the name of the teaching's initiator. The best explanation of the question asked at the outset – why these particular seven? – is the simplest: the author had an urgent message to these communities and had good reasons to expect that his message will be heeded.

In spite of its value for the study of problems besetting Christian communities of his day, when it comes to the outside world, the author's concentration on his own milieu makes the Apocalypse virtually useless for a historian, unlike e.g. the Acts of Apostles, as good a source as any on life in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire in the first century. One result of the fact that in the Apocalypse the seven cities as such are mere names is that these cities, in spite of the exalted status of the text in which they appear, were for ages absent from the imagery of the Westerners with the exception of Ephesus with its particularly strong early Christian connotations (apart from the unforgettable scene in the Acts of Apostles [19.23-40] the traditional last dwelling-place of Mary and Apostle John, and the seat of the two Ephesian Councils).

These ancient cities, however, have survived, some as still visible ruins, some uncovered by archaeology. The book of Elżbieta Jastrzębowska, an impressive presentation of their vestiges (120 photos personally taken by the author), backed by an extensive archaeological and topographical commentary and an exhaustive survey of the respective scholarly discussion, recreates the scenery in which the communities to which the author of the Apocalypse addressed his message lived. Of course, since these cities varied greatly in size, location, importance and destiny to come, space devoted to each varies as well. The chapter on Ephesus, the capital of the province and one of its greatest cities, scientifically excavated since the end of the 19th century, takes up exactly one third of the whole book; that on Philadelphia, a rather small town high up in the uplands, periodically destroyed by earthquakes and never subject to archaeological investigation, is a couple of pages long. Still, long or short, each chapter provides the reader with practically complete evidence on the material aspect of the seven cities in the period when the unknown John was composing his Book of Revelation.

A guide to the seven cities of the Apocalypse, then? This, and more. Asia, today's western Asia Minor, was the most prestigious province of the Eastern, Greek-speaking part of the Empire (its equivalent in the Latin-speaking West was Africa, today's Tunisia), but also the richest and the most urbanized, and as such the uncontested cultural centre of the Roman world. When the Apocalypse was being written down local cities had for more than a hundred years, since the coming of the Empire with its *Pax Romana*, enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, materially reflected in the building boom which at that very time, at the turn of the first century, became a veritable explosion. The seven cities presented in the present volume can be treated as a representative sample of the highest form of urban development under the Early Empire, nay, in the whole Antiquity.

What the material painstakingly collected and displayed by Elżbieta Jastrzębowska cannot unfold is the intellectual counterpart of the building boom, the so-called Second Sophistic: a fascinating cultural movement, once unjustly reduced to a change in the style and subject matters of rhetorics, today rightly seen as a particular cultural renaissance, ostensibly the return to intellectual and literary ideals of the glorious Greek past, in reality the creation of a particular vision of that past, shared by the upper and middle classes (respectively the performers and their audiences), which on the one hand stabilized the social order and on the other enabled the local elites not only to regain self-confidence, shattered by the shock of the Roman conquest and the equally devastating Roman civil wars, but also to impose their values on the Imperial ruling elite starting with the emperors themselves and thus to converse with them on terms of equality, if not superiority (cultural, needless to say).

The province of Asia was the cradle of that movement, the great cities of Smyrna and Ephesus in particular; but we learn from inscriptions that Philadelphia had its own sophists as well. It is a lasting paradox that the apocalyptic message, urging its addressees in the vilest Greek imaginable to stick to their own ways while waiting for the Second Coming, was directed to some members of the communities which as whole entities were at exactly the same time raising the art of savouring the Hellenic present and the cult of the Hellenic past to an unheard-of level.

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FOREWORD

The idea for this book arose during my first Turkish trip in 1994 to Constantinople and Ephesus; it was developed during my second trip in 1996, when together with the ruins of many other ancient cities of Asia Minor I was able to visit Pergamum, Sardis and Laodicea. A stay in Ephesus in 1997 (concentrating on Late Antique and Byzantine monuments) and a next expedition in 1998 along the western coast of Asia Minor, when I had the opportunity to see Thyatira and Philadelphia, conclusively crystallized my original idea of the first publication in 1999, which I updated finally in 2016. At the end of September 2016 I review all these cities again, made a new photographic documentation, which was used in this edition. I was impressed by the surviving splendours of the monuments of Ephesus and Pergamum, by the famed magnificence of Smyrna, Sardis and Laodicea, and intrigued by the scantiness of the remains of Thyatira and Philadelphia, and a question which had long been bothering me was revived: Why did the author of the Apocalypse choose these seven cities in particular among so many other possible cities of Asia Minor, some of them many times more important and likewise Christianized early, and direct his letters to these, sending to them his vision of the end of the world? As an archaeologist I am not in a position to answer this question from the point of view of a theologian or church historian studying the earliest Christian writings. However, it seemed to me that by presenting a closer understanding of the material evidence which remains from these cities would offer a promising new approach and add a different voice to the historical discussion of the cities to whom the letters of the Apocalypse were addressed – a discussion which has already spawned an enormous literature, though mainly based on written sources. At the same time I realized that, in this age of open borders and Turkey's popularity as a holiday destination, I was not the first traveller on the trail of the cities of the Apocalypse: there are other interested travellers following the same route through these cities who might find a guide of this kind to the material evidence of the visible sites useful. However, the reader should be warned that the presentation of the seven cities will not be uniform or exhaustive, since it is limited by the degree of

preservation and accessibility of the surviving monuments. Despite this I hope that the large quantity of material evidence that has survived will make it possible to look afresh at what these urban centres were like at the turn of the first two centuries of our era and why their Christian communities were granted the honour of receiving letters of the Apocalypse.

During my journeys I was able to take a large number of photographs at the sites I visited and in the local museums, but above all I had the opportunity to familiarize myself at first hand with the geographical conditions and geological formation of these places, I could feel their climate on my own skin and gain an understanding of the geographical basis of farming in the western part of Asia Minor. In this respect the region has changed little since ancient times. There is still a flourishing agriculture in the green valleys of rivers, which are changed by the heavy autumn and spring rains from little summer streams or completely dried-up beds into great rivers fertilizing the surrounding land. The many rocky mountain ranges, which are often very high, are still deserted and inhospitable, just as they were in the past. In antiquity the lower-lying parts of these ranges were no doubt covered with dense forests (today these survive only vestigially. The greatest changes, as is usual in the course of history, have been suffered by the very objects of my quest – the cities mentioned in the Apocalypse – Ephesus (today a splendid archaeological site near Selçuk), Smyrna (now the vast seething city of Izmir with a population of 3 million), Pergamum (an imposing hill of ruins above the sleepy little town of Bergama), Thyatira (almost completely covered by the modern buildings of the middle-sized city of Akhişar), Sardis (a site on the road between Izmir and Ankara, only certain parts of which have been excavated), Philadelphia (like Thyatira obliterated by the modern buildings of the small city of Alaşehir), and lastly Laodicea (a deserted hill with a few ruins visible on the surface of a wasteland, only recently uncovered). Archaeological researches into these sites are also very unevenly spread, as is the publication of the architectural complexes and moveable objects from these cities. Thus there are hundreds of publications devoted to Ephesus, which has been studied by the Austrians for over a century and in this respect can be compared only with Pergamum, the “flagship” excavation of the Germans, which also has a tradition of study going back a century and an equally rich bibliography. At Sardis, which has been intensively excavated by the Americans since the Second World War, complexes that are older or more recent than the period that interests us have been studied in more detail. In Smyrna only the agora has been uncovered and published, and the rich collections of the museum do not yet have a detailed catalogue. Laodicea is the most recent of the cities to be excavated, but the Turkish publications are not easily accessible. At Thyatira and Philadelphia no systematic excavations whatever

have been conducted. Nonetheless, the publications on all these sites and their moveable objects today comprise hundreds of items constituting an infinite abundance of assessments and interpretations. The second phase of my researches took place in the libraries of Warsaw University and above all in the Österreichisches Archäologisches Institut and the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften in Vienna, finally at the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Berlin, Rome and Istanbul, as well as in the École Française de Rome.

I owe a special debt of thanks to Martin Dodsworth, Krzysztof Rybicki, Maria and Jerzy Jastrzębowski for linguistic improvement of the final English version. Last but not least I would like to thank my excellent colleagues and friends: Françoise-Hélène Massa-Pairault, Filippo Coarelli and Patrizio Pensabene for all valuable comments regarding the substance of my book, as well as my husband Ryszard for patience and help at work and at common travel in Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

The Apocalypse of St John is probably the most enigmatic text to have entered the New Testament. This is not only because of its obscure, visionary and symbolic content and form, but also because of the lack of agreement among specialists as to the identity of its author or the date when it was written. This does not mean, however, that the Apocalypse is an unusual text or the only one of its kind. In fact, it belongs to a literary genre, which was quite widespread in the Hellenistic and Roman East. I shall not be joining the historical, philological and theological discussion of the content, symbolism and authorship of the Apocalypse, a discussion that has been continuing for many centuries and is still far from reaching a conclusion¹. The beautiful and terrible vision of the coming of the Lord at the end of time is not the subject of the present work. I take it merely as a starting point for a presentation of the cities to which the messages contained in chapters two and three are addressed, for an attempt to reconstruct their immediate environs and to depict what remains of them today, and lastly for an explanation of why these particular cities, and not others, were chosen as recipients.

All that is known of the author of the Apocalypse is that his name was John and that he was on Patmos when he wrote the Apocalypse. He says so himself, adding that he was banished to the Greek island in the Aegean Sea for his Christian faith². His exile is corroborated by patristic tradition, although this dates from about 100 years later. Eusebius of Caesarea, drawing on Irenaeus, (*Against all heresies*, second half of the second century AD), states in his *Ecclesiastical History* that John was exiled to the isle of Patmos during the persecution of the Christians ordered by the emperor Domitian, that after the tyrant's death he returned to Ephesus, directed the Church in Asia from there, and ended his days in the city³. "Whether he fled to Patmos or was sent there by authorities is unknown"⁴, but, according to Eusebius, besides Ephesus he "had personal contacts in the Lycus Valley"⁵. The relative lateness of this attestation makes the date of the composition of the Apocalypse less certain than the place of its redaction. Earlier it was generally accepted, however, following Irenaeus and Eusebius, that John wrote it under the rule of Domitian, in other words in the 80s or 90s of the first century AD⁶. Nowadays to

some scholars it seems more probable, that he wrote it under the reign of Hadrian, in the 20s of the second century⁷. There is no certainty about the identity of John, the author of the Apocalypse, but traditionally, though by no means unanimously, he was identified with John the Evangelist, who was also the author of three epistles included in the New Testament, or else with John the Theologian (the Divine), who settled in Ephesus⁸. It is true that the apocryphal Acts of John (*Acta Joannis*) from the second half of the second century AD describe in detail the missionary activity in Ephesus of the Apostle John, the beloved disciple of Christ, but this text is characterized by a lack of knowledge of the city and its main buildings, as well as by a large dose of fantasy and wishful thinking in the description of events. It is above all an apologetic text and does not have much value as a historical source for the person of the author or for the topography of Ephesus⁹.

As has been mentioned, the Apocalypse belongs to a specific literary genre. Like the Acts of John (though for different reasons), it should not be related to real events. The Apocalypse is a visionary text – deeply rooted in the Judaic tradition of such texts, which use a variety symbols to reveal a world outside historical reality¹⁰. However, the seven letters are addressed to seven real cities of Asia, a province of the Roman Empire (present-day Asia Minor): Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (fig. 1). More precisely, it is directed to the churches of those cities, that is, to some of the earliest Christian communities outside Palestine. The number seven seems here to have a mainly symbolical significance as a holy and perfect number, which occurs in various connections in the Apocalypse: seven candlesticks, stars, seals, plagues, trumpets and bowls¹¹.

It is traditionally and fairly generally believed that the choice of cities and the order in which they are mentioned reflects the route of a journey from Ephesus first northwards across Lydia via Smyrna to Pergamum, and then south-eastwards by way of the Lydian cities of Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia, to Phrygian Laodicea¹². This itinerary does not follow the traditional roads in the river valleys, it links them across mountains, from the valley of the Kayster, through the Hermos valley to the Kaikos valley, returning to the Hermos, where at the foot of the mountains it crosses over to the extensive valley of the Meander and, further on, the Likos valley. Only parts of this route follow the main roads, the so-called royal routes of antiquity, which run from west to east, mainly along the rivers Hermos and Meander, from the Ionian coast into the interior of Anatolia and on to Syria. However, during the Roman Empire, besides these main roads, the other roads we have mentioned, which cut across mountains and river valleys, were also used¹³. Although all seven cities were located on Roman roads, to take this itinerary as the criterion determining the choice and order of the cities in the Apocalypse raises certain



1. Asia Minor.

doubts. On this route at that time there were other cities – very significant ones (particularly on the Meander between Laodicea and Ephesus) – yet these urban centres were not the recipients of apocalyptic messages. Restricted to the symbolical number of seven, the individual messages to the selected cities surely also had the character of open letters intended equally for members of other Christian communities in the region already in existence at that time. Neither does the argument that the cities were chosen as recipients on the ground that they were significant representatives of their regions in the ecclesiastical administration then taking shape give a satisfactory answer to the question why such “inconspicuous” cities as Philadelphia and Thyatira were included, while such great and ancient cities as Tralles, Magnesia or Miletus – which are nearer to Ephesus and which had been christianized early on – were omitted, as was the significant Hierapolis near Laodicea¹⁴.

Above all, however, the meaning and character of the Apocalypse, its spiritual and visionary aspect call for an explanation of the choice of the recipients other than solely in terms of the Roman road network and of ecclesiastical geography. The missives to the seven cities lack any indication of the criterion for their selection, and convey no information regarding their appearance or significance.

All the letters have fairly similar contents and structure. They all begin with the same formula of the delivery to the Angel of the Church of the given city, a personification of its community as it were, of a letter from the ruler of the universe (designated differently in each case). Then follow the moral characteristics of the city, that is, an assessment of the behaviour of its citizens with praise or rebuke, exhortation to repentance and a return to the path of truth and faith, and finally a warning of the punishment of sinners and heretics (though the only heretics mentioned are the Nicolaitans) The letters close with an assurance of rewards and final victory for those who are faithful and obedient¹⁵. In John's estimation Smyrna, Thyatira and Philadelphia were worthy of praise, while Pergamum, Sardis and Laodicea deserved rebuke, and Ephesus is equally praised and censured. Steven Friesen sums up matters in this way: "The naming of seven cities is important, for the number seven is one of the major devices used to organize material in Revelation. As a symbol in Revelation, the number seven represents perfection, wholeness, the divine order that defines the cosmos and history. Thus, the implication of writing to seven churches is that John's Revelation was intended for all the churches in the area" i. e. in Roman Asia¹⁶.

It is not for me to interpret these appraisals; I shall leave their theological and moral elucidation to scholars and exegetes¹⁷. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the frequent attempt to relate them to historical facts, persons and places can be fruitful, since this entails joining two entirely separate spheres: historical reality and a spirituality which negates the real world¹⁸. In accordance with my own archaeological training and based on my first-hand knowledge of what has survived in the cities of the Apocalypse, as well as publications about the remains of these cities – I should like instead to present what the cities looked like and how their inhabitants lived in the period about the time when the Apocalypse was written, that is, from the mid-first to the mid-second century AD. While this is not the first account of a journey in time through these cities, I hope that with the aid of the research of recent decades I shall be able to look afresh and cast more light on the cities of the Apocalypse and their inhabitants, as well as help in understanding historical reality and what the archaeological remains of these centres have to tell all those interested travellers exploring them today¹⁹.

By way of reminder of the messages of the Apocalypse and as a link between the successive sections of this book, the introduction to each city is preceded by the text of the letter addressed to it. Concise information about the state of research or its lack, and a brief outline of the history of the city form an introduction to the main topographical part of each section, i.e. the reconstruction of the townscape and the presentation of particular architectural complexes, as well as important individual buildings from the first century after Christ and the first half of the following century.

NOTES

¹ Cf Ramsay 1904/94; Lilje 1961; Kraft 1974; Lähnemann 1978; Böcher 1988, pp. 3851-3897; Thompson 1990; Prigent 2000; Maier 2009; see also American and Italian commentaries on the Apocalypse, Aune 1997, 1998; Lupieri 1999, pp. 105-359; Friesen 1995, pp. 290-314; idem 2001.

² *I, John, your brother and partner in hardships, in the kingdom and in perseverance in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos on account of the Word of God and of witness to Jesus*, Ap. 1, 9. *New Jerusalem Bible*, London 1990 (all other quotations are from this translation)

³ Eusebius 1926, III, 18, 2-3; 23, 1-7; 31, 2-3; cf Jones 1980, p. 1084; Günther 1995, pp. 127-128; Domitian has sometimes been suggested as the prototype for John's vision of the apocalyptic beast, cf Knibbe 1999 (b), pp. 71-80; Wilson 2014, pp. 228-231.

⁴ Friesen 2001, p. 136.

⁵ Hunter 2013, p. 150.

⁶ Cf esp. Böcher 1997, pp. 596, 608-609; Günther (1995, pp. 133, 139-211) however rules out the existence of persecution of Christians in the time of Domitian and postulates an outbreak of repression and the date of the writing of the Apocalypse to the period of Trajan's rule, c. 110; cf also Prigent 2000, pp. 200-209; Friesen 2001, p. 150.

⁷ Witulski 2007, pp. 347-350; Hunter 2013, pp. 149-150.

⁸ New Testament scholars disagree as to whether this is one person or several people of the same name, cf Wengst 1988, pp. 3753-3772; Günther 1995, pp. 125-133; Koester 1995 (a), pp. 132-139; Böcher 1997, pp. 596, 608-609; Knibbe 1998, pp. 133-134.

⁹ *Acta Joannis*, 1983, vol. 1, pp. 218-221; vol. 2, pp. 494-503, 694-695. Full of miraculous healings and resuscitations there is even a description of the demolition of the Ephesian Artemision, which certainly could not have taken place then, it has therefore little value as a historical source. Cf also Lipsius 1883/76, pp. 348-542; Engelmann 1994, pp. 297-302; Wilson 2014, p. 229.

¹⁰ Prigent 2000, pp. 205-206

¹¹ Cf Friesen 2001, p. 136.

¹² Cf Ramsay 1890, pp. 165, 167; idem 1904/94, pp. 123-141; Günther 1995, p. 132, note 37; Friesen 2001, p. 136.

¹³ Chapot 1904, p. 364-365; Hanfmann, Waldbaum 1975, pp. 18-19, ill. 8; Dąbrowa 1976, pp. 10-13.

¹⁴ Cf the detailed interpretation by Ramsay 1904/94, pp. 121-128, 136, 141.

¹⁵ Cf Ramsay 1904/94, pp. 143-150; Lähnemann 1978, pp. 524-525; Günther 1995, pp. 134-135.

¹⁶ Friesen 2001, p. 136.

¹⁷ Lähnemann 1978, pp. 525-536; Böcher 1997, p. 610; Aune 1997; Friesen 2001, pp. 135-217; Hunter 2013, pp. 149-183.

¹⁸ Cf. especially Ramsay 1904/94.

¹⁹ Of the earliest accounts of travels and historical-archaeological studies cf especially: Smith 1678; Arundell 1828; Ramsay 1904/94, pp. 151-171, 183-194, 205-212, 231-239, 259-290, 286-293, 303-312; Lambakis 1909; Giuliano 1981, pp. 18-49, 85-90; Blake, Edmonds 1988, pp. 99-127; Friesen 1995, pp. 291-314; above all cf Friesen 2001.