

Iconium

Iconium was a city in the southwest part of central Asia Minor located about 95 miles (153 kilometers) from the Mediterranean coast. It is known today as Konya, a Turkish city, and capital of the province bearing the same name.

Iconium was an agricultural center famous for its wheat fields and orchards of apricots and plums. Its ideal location and climate helped establish its place as a major link in the trade routes between Syria, Ephesus, and Rome.

Little is known about the origin of the city. Its beginnings may be traced to a group of immigrant tribes from northern Greece—the Phrygians. Xenophon, a Greek historian (c. 428–354 BC), mentions it as a Phrygian city visited by Cyrus. Since the Phrygian language was spoken in Iconium, it is likely that the inhabitants considered themselves of this extraction. Although the name Iconium was originally Phrygian, a myth was later created to infuse it with Greek meaning. According to this legend, a great flood destroys mankind. Life is restored when Prometheus and Athena breathe life into human images made from mud left by subsiding waters. The Greek word for “image” is *eikon*, from which comes the name Iconium, according to the legend.

In the third century BC, Iconium was governed by

the Seleucid kings of Syria. As proponents of Greek culture, the Seleucids soon turned Iconium into a Hellenistic city. The Greek language was spoken and the people were ruled by two magistrates appointed annually. Despite later domination by the Gauls and Pontic kings (c. 165–63 BC), Iconium retained its Hellenistic character until NT times. In 36 BC Mark Antony gave the city to Antymas. Upon his death in 25 BC, Iconium joined the neighboring cities of Lystra, Derbe, and Pisidian Antioch as a part of the province of Galatia and so became incorporated into the Roman Empire.

The apostle Paul visited Iconium on his first missionary journey. Having been forced to leave Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:51), Paul came to the synagogue in Iconium. His preaching initially won the approval of both the Jews and Greeks, but unbelieving Jews soon incited a riot against him (14:1–7). Paul fled to Lystra, but he was followed by the Iconian Jews, who stoned him and left him for dead (v 19; cf. 2 Tm 3:11). Cared for by friends, Paul was able to join Barnabas in Derbe, where they made many disciples then later returned to Iconium to strengthen the Christians there (Acts 14:20–23). During the second missionary journey, Timothy was recommended to Paul and Silas by the Christians at Iconium (16:1–2).