

# ***Hilasterion* and Imperial Rhetoric: A Possible New Reading of Romans 3:25**

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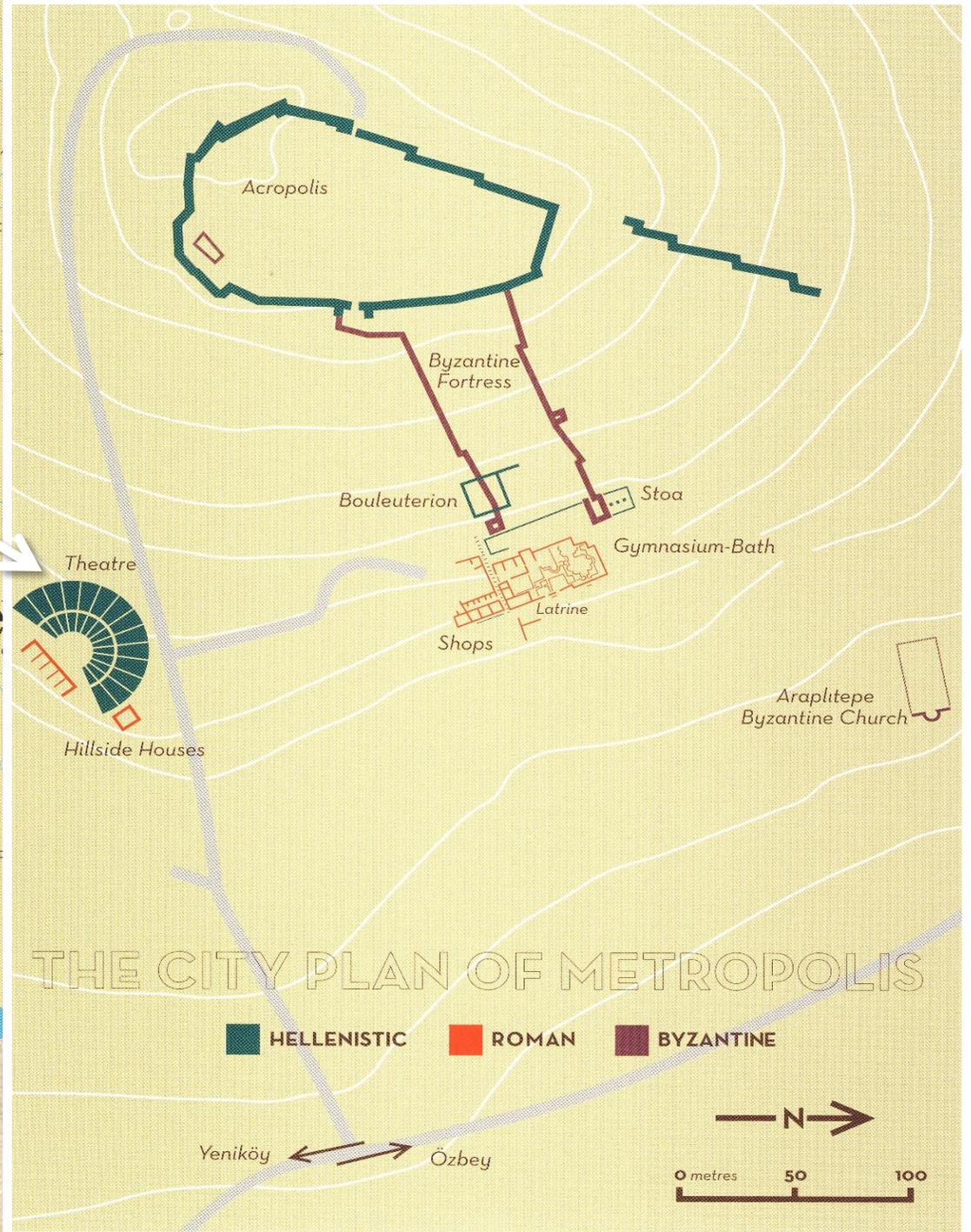
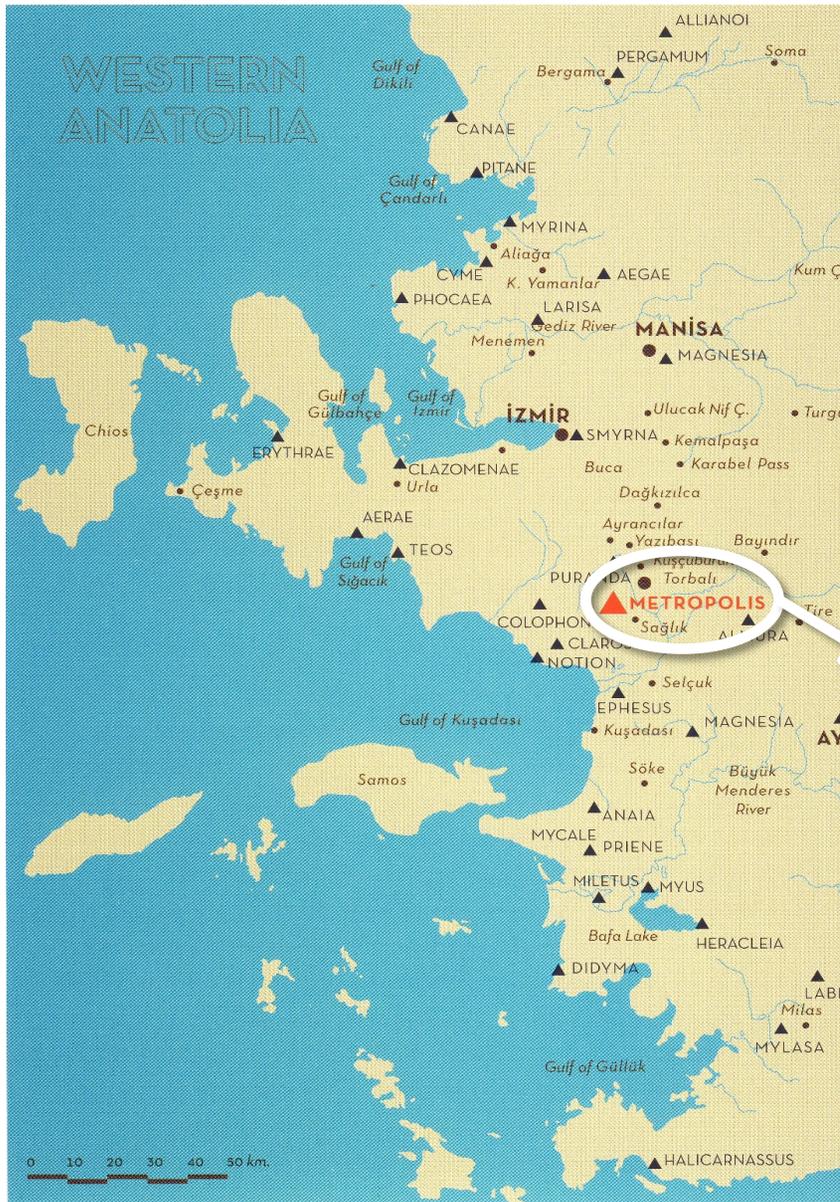
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**New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary  
March 3, 2016**

**“Progress in the understanding of early Christianity is exclusively based on papyri and inscriptions”**

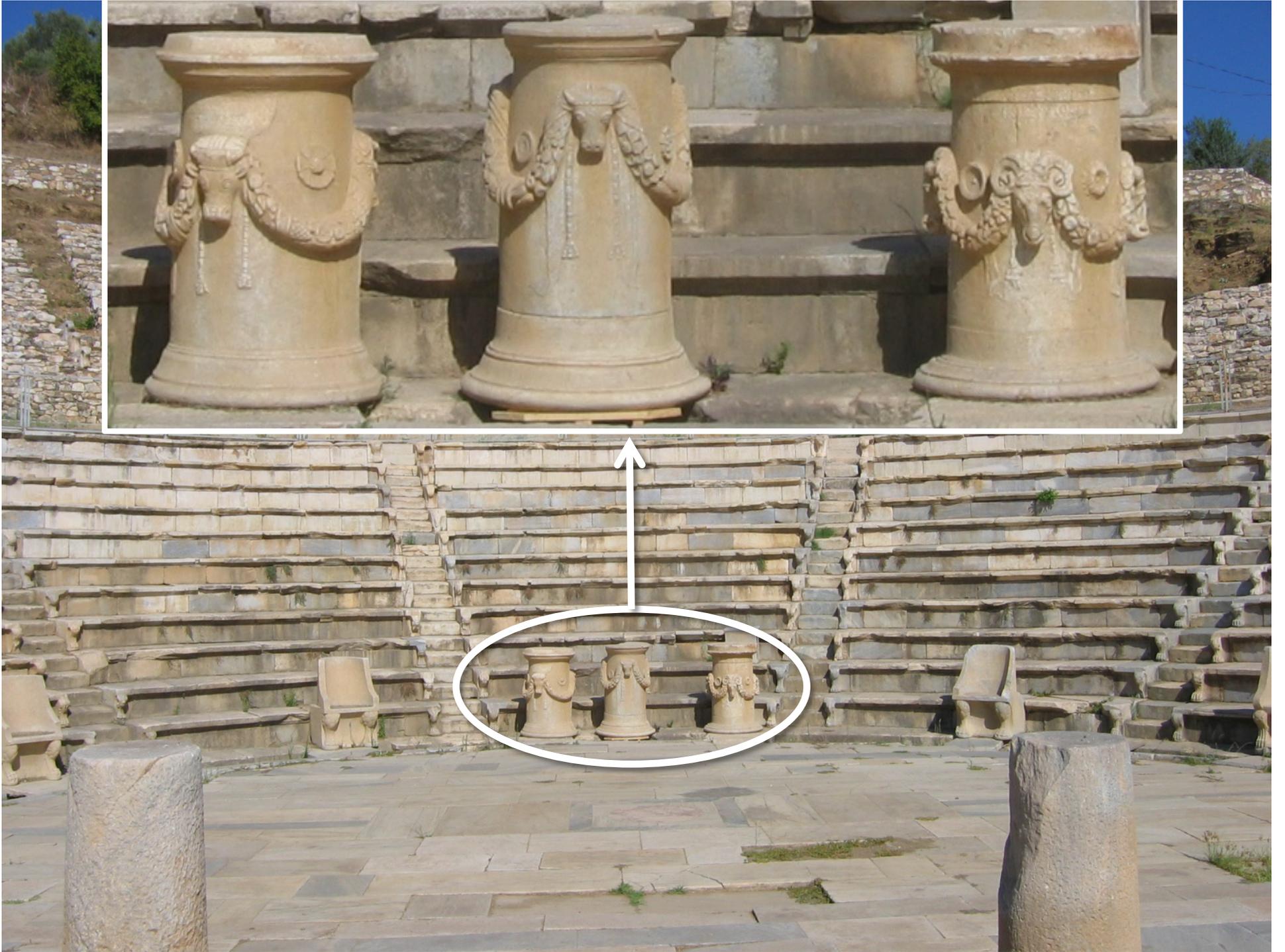
**Angelos Chaniotis**

**“Listening to Stones: Orality and Emotions in Ancient Inscriptions” in *Epigraphy and the Historical Sciences***

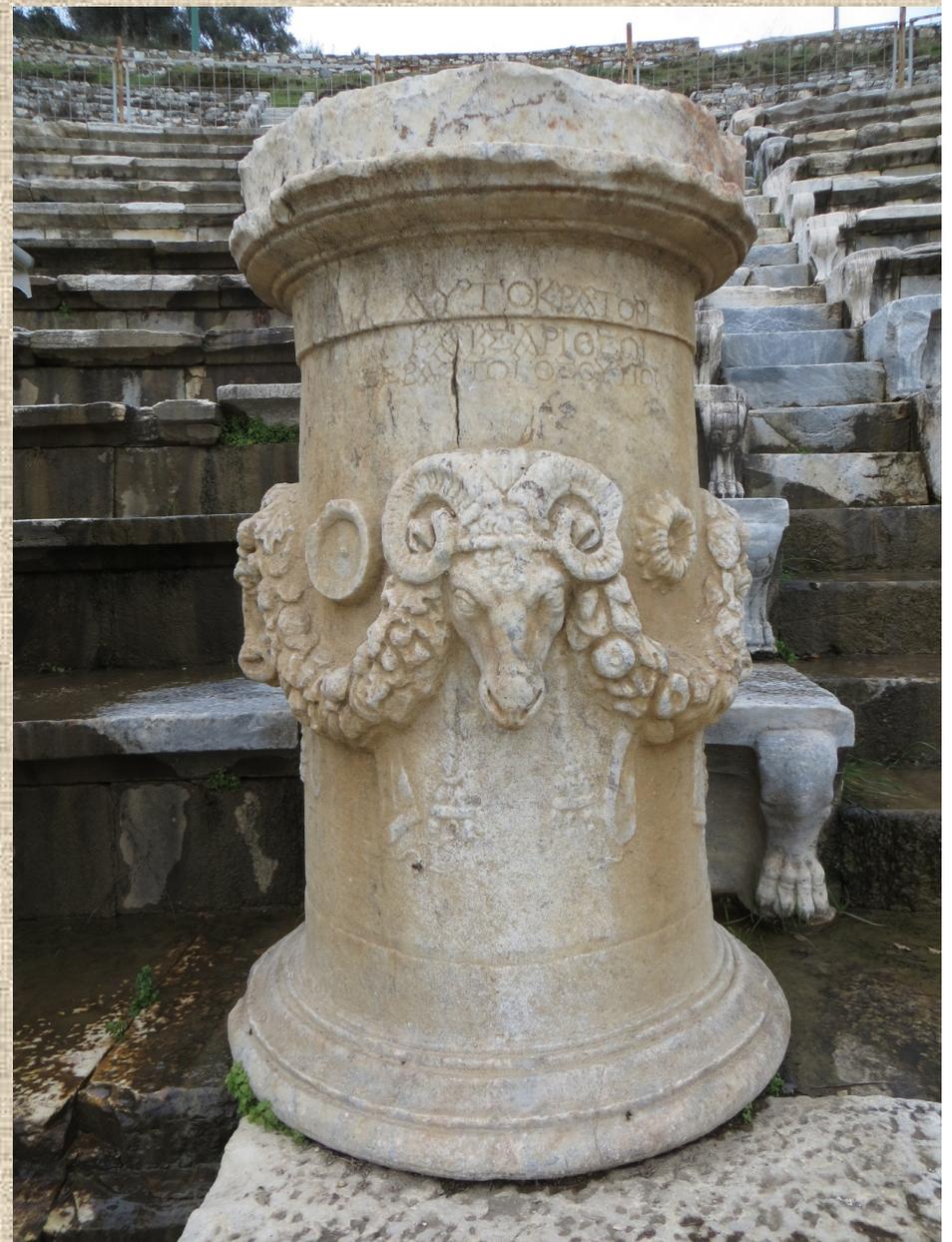


# Excavations at Metropolis

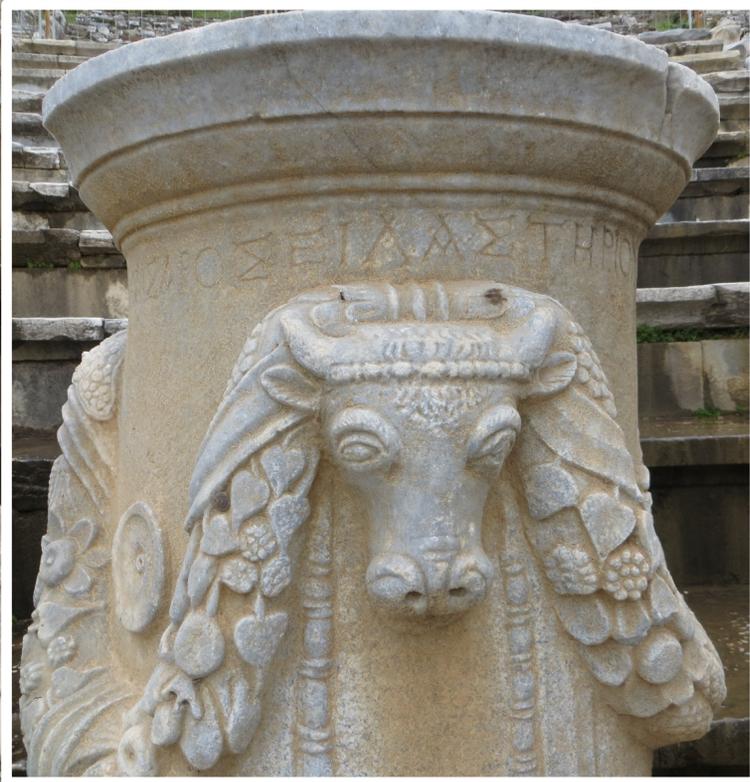
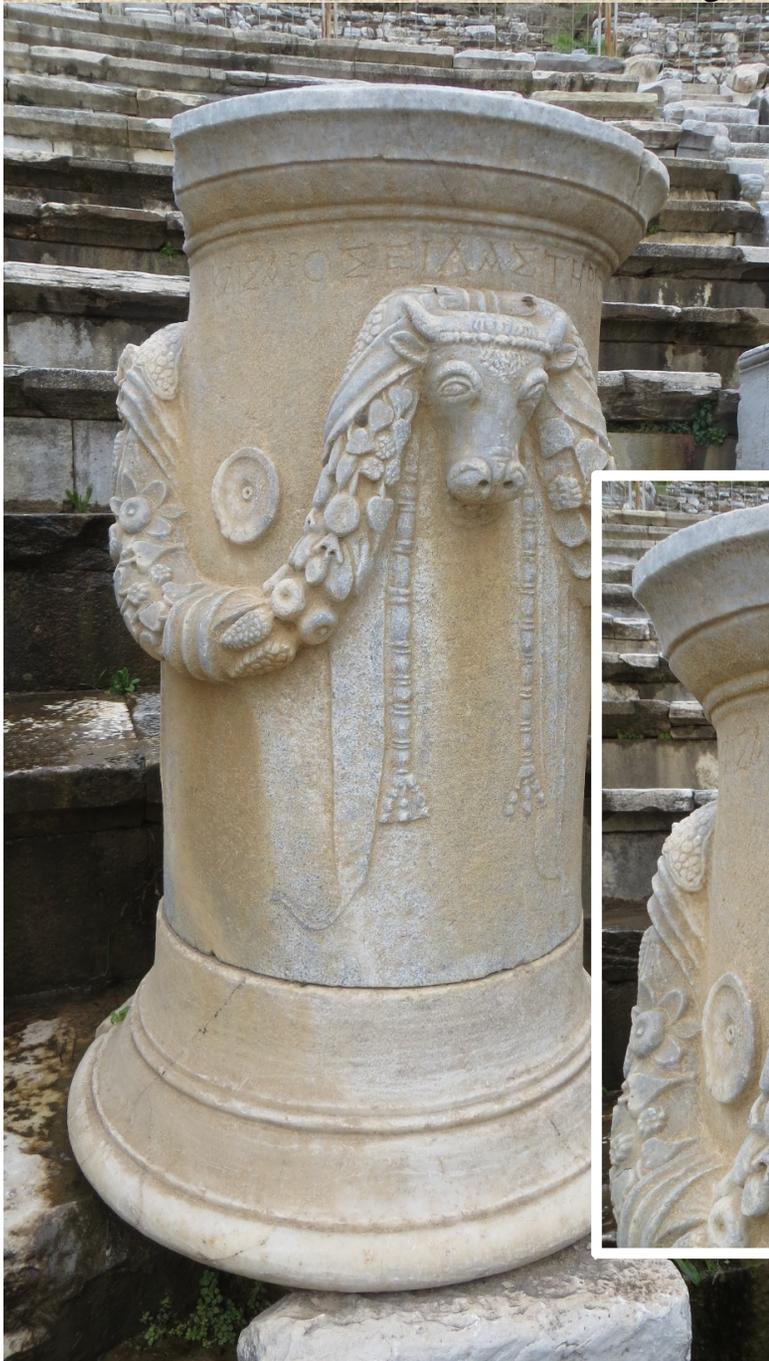
- Archaeologists from Izmir's Doküz Eylül University discovered three round altars in theater's orchestra during excavations at Metropolis in 1990
- Description: "The altars are ornamented with bull's head, ram and deer heads among which grapes, pomegranate, pine cones and embellished garlands are placed"
- Altar on L dedicated to Germanicus and dates from AD 4–19 while other two altars dedicated to Augustus
- Altar on R reads: *αὐτοκράτωρι Καίσαρι θεῷ σεβαστῷ θεοῦ υἱῷ*; "to the emperor Caesar, the god Augustus, son of god"



# Altars to Germanicus and Augustus

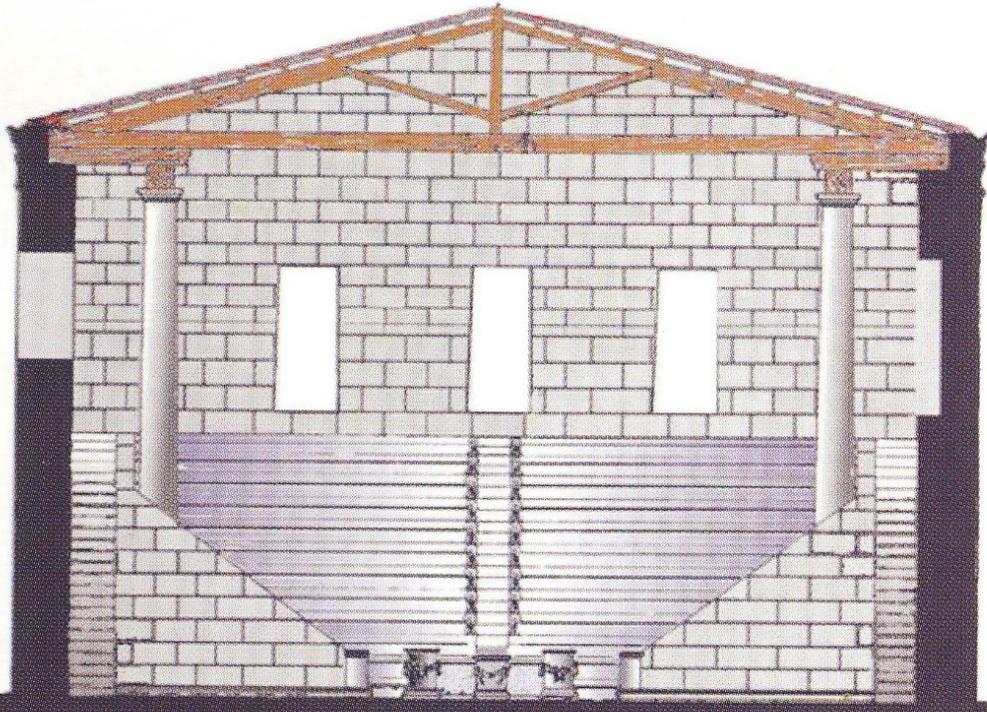


# Καίσαρος είλαστηρίου

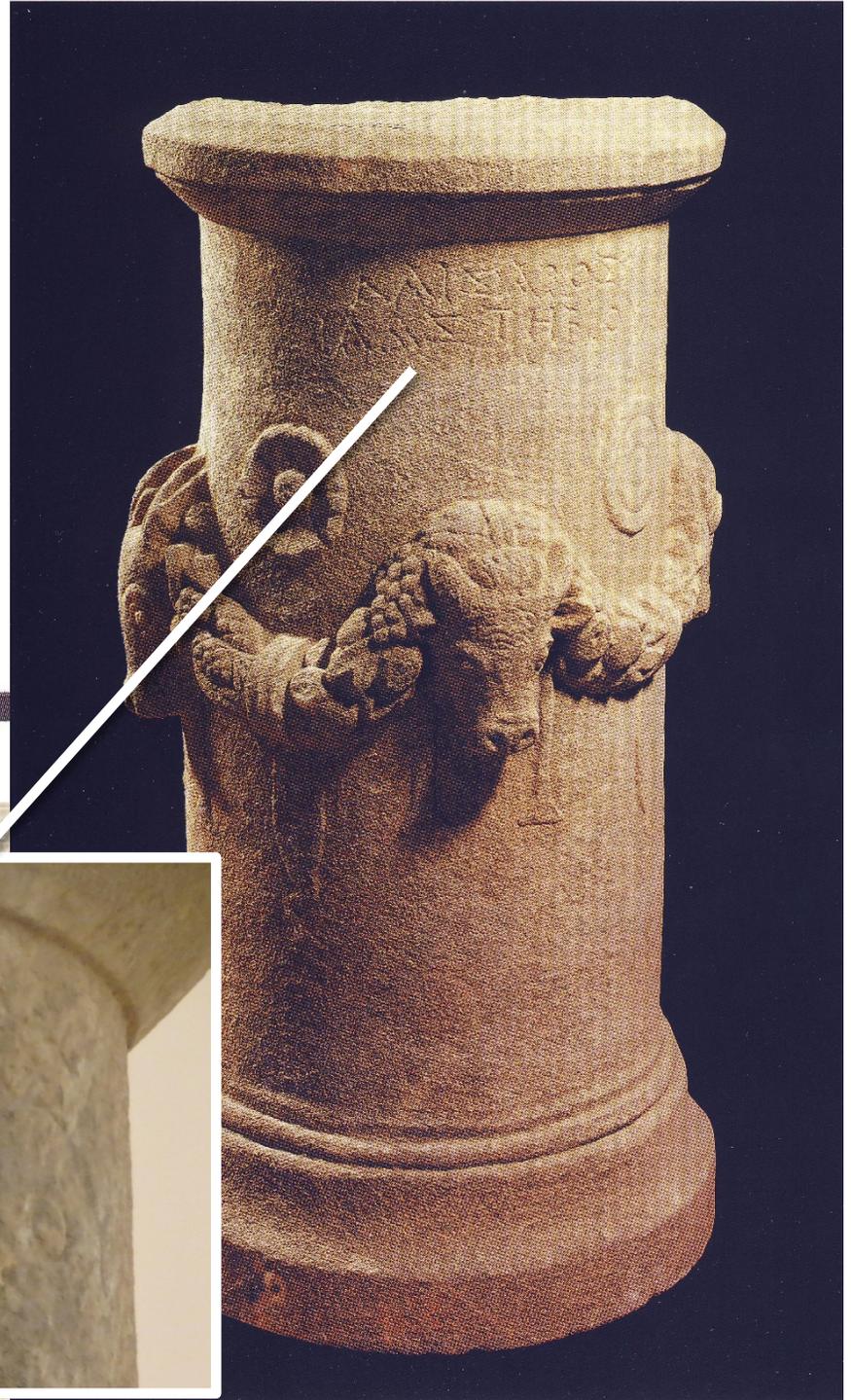


## Bouleterion Altar

- **Excavations at bouleterion in 1992 found matching altar with inscription**  
*Καίσαρος ἰλαστηρίου*
- **Use of epsilon in theater inscription an example of iotacism (or itacism) known elsewhere in Asia Minor**
- **Size of both: H. 4.1 ft; Top Dia. 2.1 ft**



Restitution of Bouleuterion.



# Dating of Altars

- After victory at Actium in 31 BC and suicide of Antony & Cleopatra in 30 BC, Octavian spends 6 months in Samos and Ephesus
- In 29 BC Roman senate awards him triple triumph and
- *Koinon* (assembly) of Asia builds imperial cult temple in Pergamum and sanctuary of Dea Roma and Divus Julius in Ephesus
- Benjamin and Raubitschek on a similar altar from Thera: “The omission of the name Augustus shows that this altar belongs to the period before 27 B.C”

**Ephesian Denarius (29-27 BC)  
Victory on ship's prow with palm & wreath;  
Octavian in decorated quadriga**



# Paul and Metropolis

- Does not visit Metropolis at start of 3<sup>rd</sup> journey (Acts 19:1)
- Evangelizes successfully in Ephesus and Asia for 2 years: “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10)
- Ramsay: “It may also be regarded as practically certain that the great cities which lay on the important roads connecting those seven leading cities with one another had all ‘heard the word’”
- Passes through after riot on way to Troas (Acts 20:1; cf 2 Cor 2:12)
- Paul probably saw one or both of the altars during his visits
- Romans written in Corinth later in the 3<sup>rd</sup> journey (AD 56/57)

## **ἱλαστήριον in LXX**

- **Refers to the golden place on the ark of the covenant above which the indivisible presence of God was thought to hover and where blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement**
- **Refers also to purification, propitiation, and expiation in a more general sense**
- **Ἱλαστήριον the center of the sanctuary and focus of both God's revelation (Exod 25:22; Lev 16:2; Num 7:89) and atonement for sin (Lev 16)**

## ἱλαστήριον in Pagan Texts

- 6 inscriptions from Kos and Rhodes use it as “propitiatory monument” or “votive offering”
- Bailey mentions these concluding that “the application of ἱ λ α σ τ ῆ ρ ι ο ν to Greek votive offerings was the normal or mainstream use in the first century AD”

## ἱλαστήριον *Hilasterion Legomenon* in Paul

**“whom God put forward as a propitiation (*hilasterion*) by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (Rom 3:25 ESV)**

ὃν προέθετο ὁ θεὸς ἱλαστήριον διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων

# ἱλαστήριον in Rom 3:25

- “Expiation” or “place of expiation” (BDAG)
- “Sacrifice of atonement” (NIV, NRSV) or “propitiation” (ESV, NKJV); “mercy seat” (NET)
- Dunn: ““The word was probably chosen to evoke or emerged as summary of a complex of ideas.... The metaphor is different of course from the idea of ‘God in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Cor 5:19), but Paul could hold the two together without difficulty (2 Cor 5:21); that he can use such apparently conflicting imagery should warn us against pressing the metaphorical language for a too literal or allegorical meaning” (*Romans 1-8*, 170)

# Sacrifice of a Lamb



## Caesar as ἰλαστήριος

- Antony and Cleopatra spend winter of 33-32 in Ephesus so province of Asia firmly in their camp, thus Octavian visits cities to regain their loyalty
- Magie: “In the course of these two visits the communities and princes that had supported Antony made their peace with the new ruler (*RRAM*, 1:440)
- Dreyer and Engelmann: “After his military successes Augustus had tried to overcome the chasm which had produced a long civil war and had offered his opponents the hand of reconciliation”
- Metropolis erects altars for “Caesar the Reconciler” to thank him for his gracious acts of peace-making with the formerly hostile cities

## Jesus as ἰλαστήριος

- Reconciliation a key subtext in Romans with horizontal and vertical dimensions
- Jews and Gentiles are both sinful (1:18–3:20) so humanity must be reconciled to God through faith in and of Jesus Christ
- Tension had developed in Roman church between Gentile and Jewish believers after the Jews returned following Claudius' expulsion
- Paul's exhortations (esp. chaps 9–11) served as reconciliatory language to ease tensions
- Jesus as ἰλαστήριος was key to solving both situations

# Conclusion

- Does Paul use *ἰλαστήριον* as an anti-imperial reading and another “hidden transcript” in Romans?
- Altars of Metropolis are local expressions of belief that Octavian was the divine gift given to reestablish order and peace in the world through his reconciling power
- Imperial theology of Metropolis’ elite that Octavian was the reconciler of the world contradicted Paul’s theology that Jesus Christ was that reconciler
- Roman church would recognize this theological dissonance
- Other inscriptions with epithet *ἰλαστήριος* will be discovered showing that concept of “reconciling Caesar” was more widespread in eastern empire