

# “Why Wasn’t This Perfume Sold for Three Hundred Denarii?” The Perfume of Mary Magdalene and the Chronicle of an Ancient Voyage in the Eastern Mediterranean

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## Abstract

In two episodes—Mark (14: 3-5), Luke (7: 36-38), and John (12: 1-5)—Mary Magdalene anoints Jesus’ feet with perfumed oil and dries them with her hair. John reports both the quantity of perfume—a pound of very costly ointment made from pure nard—and its market value, 300 denarii. The data indicate an unusual possession, as both the quantity and the market value of the nard were very high for a house, albeit one belonging to wealthy people. Why did Mary have a pound of perfumed ointment of such high commercial value in her home? The first answer could be: the perfume was useful for her ancient “profession”, most likely practiced in the baths of Magadala, and she still had a supply of it. This answer, however, does not exclude another. The clues to this second answer—which is not an alternative to the first but in agreement with it—are given in *The Gospel as It Was Revealed to Me* in which Maria Valtorta, an Italian mystic writer, narrates the journey, mostly by sea, of Peter and other apostles, from Ptolemais to Tyre, Seleucia Pieria and then to Antioch (Roman Syria), where Lazarus’ family owned a house, and finally to nearby Antigonía where they owned a large farm. In this farm, they cultivated a variety of flowers and aromatic plants on a large scale, most likely to sell them to the local perfume industry, well-established in the Antioch area, or to use them to make their own perfumes. This large-scale operation and/or close contact with those who produced the final product would explain why Mary owned such a “wholeseller’s amount” of very expensive perfume. The sea voyage from Ptolemais to Tyre and Seleucia Pieria, and the cart journey to Antioch and Antigonía, are described in great detail, although Maria Valtorta did not have any relevant cultural, historical and archaeological information. In conclusion, this study has investigated the biblical account of Mary Magdalene possessing a

pound of expensive perfume. It has proposed an explanation derived from the mystical writings of Maria Valtorta: Mary's family ran a large farm growing flowers and aromatic plants near Antioch, on a large scale. This hypothesis is supported by a strong correspondence between Valtorta's detailed descriptions of an ancient sea voyage and modern archaeological and historical evidence of the ports and routes involved.

## Keywords

Mary Magdalene, John's Gospel, Maria Valtorta, Ptolemais, Tyre, Seleucia Pieria, Antioch, Antigonía, Ointment, Nard

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to unveil one of the economic activities of Lazarus' family, Jesus's beloved friends. Clues to the nature of this activity are present in the canonical Gospels and in the writings of Maria Valtorta (1897-1961), an Italian mystic author of a large literary corpus written—she claims—after receiving “visions” of Jesus' life.

In two episodes, Mary Magdalene or just Mary—sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany, see (Haskins, 1995; Berno, 2023; Józwiak, 2024) for a discussion on identifying Mary with Mary Magdalene—anooints Jesus' feet with perfumed oil and dries them with her hair: the first occurred in Capernaum, Galilee; the second in Bethany, Judea. They are recounted in Mark (14: 3-5), Luke (7: 36-38), and John (12: 1-5).

John reports interesting data for our story: the quantity of perfume and its market value: Mary then took a pound of very costly ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Then Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, who was to betray him, said, “Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?”

A Roman pound is equivalent to approximately 327 g and 342 ml, and 300 denarii was approximately the annual wage of a farm labourer (Rops, 1968; Klop-penborg, 2008; Udoh, 2020). The data indicate an unusual possession, as both the quantity and the market value were very high for a house, albeit one belonging to wealthy people.

The following question arises: why did Mary have a pound of perfumed ointment of such great market value in her home? The answer might be: the perfume was useful for her old “profession,” and she still had a supply of it. However, this answer does not exclude another, which is not an alternative to the first but in agreement with it.

The clues to this second answer are reported in *The Gospel as Revealed to Me* (referred to as the EMV below), in which Maria Valtorta narrates the journey, mostly by ship, of Peter with seven other apostles, John of Endor, and Syntyche,

the latter two characters unknown to the Gospels. The journey took them from Ptolemais to Tyre, to Seleucia Pieria and finally to Antioch (Roman Syria), where Lazarus owned a house, and to nearby Antigonía, where he owned a large farm. Lazarus' family cultivated a variety of flowers and aromatic plants on a large scale. This activity suggests that the farm supplied raw materials to the local perfume industry, which was well-established in the Antioch area, and, most likely, the farm itself produced perfumes.

In this article, I reconstruct the apostles' alleged sea voyage from Ptolemais to Seleucia, and their overland journey to Antioch, examining whether the details extensively reported by Maria Valtorta align with what historians and archaeologists know about perfumes, the value of money, navigation in the eastern Mediterranean, the ancient ports of Ptolemais, Tyre, and Seleucia, and the map of ancient Antioch. The EMV excerpts reported below should be interpreted as "data" and should therefore be read carefully.

Presuming that a mystic's observations are "data" goes beyond standard archaeological and historical research and some scholars may not accept it, but it is impossible to trace her sources because Maria Valtorta certainly had no historical or archaeological atlases, specialized texts, or even popular literature on these topics, as the brief biography in Section 2 reminds. In this article, therefore, I assume that her data are true and seek confirmation in the literature. I can anticipate that everything Maria Valtorta described is fully confirmed, and I have no rational explanation to propose for her multidisciplinary knowledge and sources.

The article is ideally divided into two parts. The first, Sections 2-6, presents a brief biography of Maria Valtorta and her literary corpus (Section 2); episodes of the anointing of Jesus (Section 3); the perfume industry in the Roman Empire (Section 4); the value of the denarius (Section 5) and ancient travelling in the Mediterranean (Section 6). The second part, Sections 7 - 11, presents excerpts from the EMV of the entire voyage, divided by city (Section 7); a description of Ptolemais (Section 8); Tyre (Section 9); Seleucia (Section 10) with their ancient ports; Antioch and its territory (Section 11), according to the knowledge of historians and archaeologists, with a detailed parallel comparison with what Maria Valtorta wrote about the same locations. Finally, Section 12 summarizes the main findings of this comparison and concludes that Maria's family operated a large farm growing flowers and aromatic plants near Antioch on a large scale. This hypothesis is validated by the strong correspondence between Valtorta's detailed descriptions of an ancient sea voyage and modern archaeological and historical evidence of the ports and routes involved 2,000 years ago.

## 2. Maria Valtorta and Her Inexplicable Multidisciplinary Knowledge

Maria Valtorta was an Italian writer active during the Second World War and immediately afterward. Her large literary work (*Matricciani, 2022a*)—based, as she claims, on mystical visions, the evaluation of which obviously goes beyond sci-

ence and this article—contains a detailed life of Jesus of Nazareth. A rigorous and scholarly analysis of her writings on the life of Jesus—recounted in her major work, *Il Vangelo come mi è stato rivelato* (*The Gospel as It Was Revealed to Me*) (Valtorta 2009)—shows that they contain extensive data regarding facts and events occurred 2000 years ago in the Holy Land, far beyond her knowledge, culture, and expertise (Matricciani & De Caro 2017; Matricciani & De Caro 2020; De Caro et al. 2020).

She reports, in real time during the alleged visions, what she sees, hears, and even smells, over a period of several years (Matricciani, 2022a). She mentions many towns, villages, buildings, palaces, Roman roads, streets, mountain paths, the Jordan River, Mediterranean ports (Caesarea, Ptolemais, Tyre, Seleucia), lakes (Tiberias, ancient Meron), streams, mountains and hills, trees and flowers, fragrances and perfumes, clothing, food, weather, landscapes, and monuments of the Holy Land at the time of Jesus, a geographical area she never visited.

Paralyzed from the waist down and bedridden since 1934 (Valtorta 1997; Centoni, 1987), she wrote at a small lectern, sitting on her bed with her shoulders supported by pillows in her home in Viareggio (Tuscany, Italy), during the Second World War and for a few years thereafter.

In Valtorta's home there was a library with various texts. However, this library lacked books on Palestine that she could consult just in case (Valtorta 2021). She only had a Bible and an Italian dictionary.

Despite the complete lack of potentially available data at the time, whenever some of her reported data have been verified, they have turned out to be unexpectedly correct, sometimes even anticipating what scholars would discover years later (De Caro et al., 2021a, De Caro et al., 2021b). This is the case, for example, of the four towers of the biblical city of Jezreel (De Caro et al., 2020); the mention of a certain “Galen,” a physician and philosopher she believes lived in the 1st century AD (Anno Domini) (EMV, chapter 129), whose identity has only recently been confirmed as a real person, different from the more famous Galen of Pergamon (La Greca et al., 2024); a different location for Golgotha (Matricciani, 2024), in agreement with modern archaeologists.

She wrote 13,193 pages of 122 school notebooks in Italian (Pisani, 2010; Matricciani, 2022a), without making any corrections, with a set of fountain pens always full of ink because she did not know when the alleged visions would arrive. These notebooks contain not only the events now published in the EMV, but also many other writings, as she interspersed the pages describing the events of Jesus' life with pages on various topics (Matricciani, 2022a). The characters in the EMV speak differently from one another, display a different style, and “speak” like real people (Matricciani, 2022b).

All these texts are now scattered partly in the EMV and partly in other books (Matricciani, 2022a). The small volume *I Quadernetti* (*Little Notebooks*, Valtorta, 2006) contains a miscellany of diverse topics, including the highly interesting text on the alleged three burial sites of St. Peter, which led to the probable discovery of his first burial site (De Caro et al., 2020) and inspired the search for the third (De

Caro et al., 2021a).

The distribution of all this literary corpus in different books is due to Emilio Pisani (1935-2023)—his family printery published Maria Valtorta's writings since the years 1950's—who collated the text with the original manuscript, titled and numbered the chapters and divided them into numbered passages.

Marta Diciotti (1910-2001), caretaker and housekeeper of the Valtorta family from 1935 (Valtorta, 1997) and an eyewitness to her writing activity—even at night because she slept in the same bedroom—recounts (Centoni, 1987) that Maria Valtorta was able to write for 2 to 6 hours without pauses, at a constant pace, and that this activity could be repeated within the same day, for up to 6 hours.

In the following, when referring to her writings, I drop the adjective “alleged,” although I mean it throughout the article, because it is not my task to declare or establish whether her “visions” were real, as that goes beyond science. However, I present and discuss the data obtained from her writings as if they were real and demonstrate that, inexplicably, they indeed appear to be so.

### 3. Mary Anoints Jesus

The two episodes of Mary anointing Jesus, narrated in the Gospels, are also reported by Maria Valtorta, the first episode in chapter 236—written on January 21, 1944-, the second in chapter 586—written on March 28, 1947. The latter corresponds to John's episode. All translations below from Italian are mine.

(EMV, 586). «Mary reenters. In her hands, she holds an amphora with a slender neck, ending in a spout as graceful as a bird's throat. The alabaster is a precious pinkish-yellow color [...] [I delete unnecessary text to illustrate the story.] She uncorks the alabaster jar and places her hand under the spout, collecting a few drops of a stringy liquid that slowly oozes from the open amphora. A sharp scent of tuberose and other essences, an intense and exquisite perfume, spreads through the room. But Mary is not satisfied with the little that comes. She bends down and with a confident blow breaks the neck of the amphora against the corner of Jesus' bed. [...] Now, the amphora has a wide mouth [...] Mary stands behind Jesus and pours the thick oil on the head of her Jesus, sprinkles it on all the locks, straightens them and then tidies them with the comb that she takes from her hair, rearranging them in order on the adored head.

Judas [Iscaiot, or Judas of Keriot, as he is known to Maria Valtorta]—up to this point he had remained silent, observing the beautiful woman with a gaze filled with lust and envy—raises his voice, *the only voice of open reproach* [emphasis added by Maria Valtorta]. The others, not all but some, had murmured or made gestures of surprised but also calm disapproval. But Judas, who had even stood up to better see the anointing spread on Christ's feet, says rudely: “What a useless and pagan waste! Why do this? And then they don't want the leaders of the Sanhedrin to murmur about sin! These are the acts of a lascivious courtesan and are unbecoming of the new life you are leading, O woman. They are too reminiscent of your past!”

The insult is such that everyone is stunned. “Yes. Are you looking at me? You have all murmured in your hearts. But now, because I have openly said what you thought, you are ready to prove me wrong. I repeat what I said. I do not mean to say that Mary is the Master’s lover. But I do say that certain actions are unbecoming of either Him or her. It is an imprudent action. And unjust, too. Yes.

Why this waste? If she wanted to destroy the memories of her past, she could have given me that jar and that ointment. It was at least a pound of pure nard! And very valuable. I would have sold it for three hundred denarii at the very least, since nard of that quality commands about that price. And I could have sold the jar, which was beautiful and precious. I would have given this money to the poor who besiege us. It is never enough. And tomorrow, in Jerusalem, there will be countless people asking for an alms.”

“That’s true!” the others agree. “You could have used a little for the Master and the other ...”»

Mary’s actions indicate a woman experienced and competent in bodywork, as Judas clearly remarks. She anoints Jesus in a manner similar to the way bath attendants cared for bathers, including the use of expensive perfumed oil (Eliav, 2000; Reed, 2024). In Magdala, in the early decades of the first century AD (Anno Domini), there was a large bath complex (De Luca & Lena, 2014) that Mary likely frequented with her Roman friends.

To continue our story and get to Lazarus’ farm, we must first investigate the production of perfumes in ancient times and the value of the denarius.

#### 4. The Perfume Industry in the Roman Empire

Cosmetics are attested in every ancient society (Olson, 2009; Angeloglou, 1970; Rees, 2023). The culture of ancient Israel is no exception, and we find numerous textual references and artefacts indicating a widespread use of cosmetics. For example, the Bible mentions the use of perfumes, incense, and other aromatic products not only as cosmetics, but also for religious and medicinal purposes, and for funerary and burial practices (King & Stager, 2001; Ben-Yehoshua, 2012). In the New Testament, the famous pericope of (John 12) is mentioned in the title of this article. The preparation and production of aromatic substances was one of the most important chemical industries in Mesopotamia (Levey, 1959).

Although we tend to think of perfumes as liquids, in the ancient world they were produced in the form of thick pastes, powders, ointments, and incense. Whatever the process, perfume production was highly labour-intensive, which likely contributed to its value as a prestige product. Perfumed ointments in the Greco-Roman world were composed of a mixture of oil—usually olive oil—astrin-gents (often mixed with wine or water), and flowers or other plant parts to impart the fragrance. Resins or gums were added to act as a fixative and help the perfume retain its fragrance.

One of the main sources on ancient perfumes is the *Naturalis Historia* (Book 12) by Pliny the Elder (about 77 AD). Pliny provides extensive information on the

ingredients used in various perfumes, as well as an in-depth discussion of their other properties, and the trade in the Roman Empire. He described perfumes, or rather, ointments, because at the time, alcohol was still unknown and perfumes were obtained primarily from the maceration of aromatic substances, not by distillation. Aromatic essences were pressed to obtain essential oils, which were then macerated in a liquid obtained from the pressing of green olives or in a liquid obtained from the pressing of unripe grapes.

There were three methods for infusing the oil excipient with aromatic substances (Ribechini, et al., 2011; Lawrence, 2019; Mahan et al., 2025).

The first method was pressing. The aromatic parts of plants were crushed in a similar way that olives were pressed in a basin. The pulp was then placed into a folded cloth; rods were placed through either end of the cloth and twisted in opposite directions so that the resulting torsion would further press the aromatic substances (Forbes, 1964; Dayagi-Mendels, 1989; Brun, 2000). This method was simple but time-consuming, even several weeks, and was later replaced by the process of maceration in oil

The second method is known as cold pressing. Aromatic substances, particularly petals, were placed on animal fat between two boards, which were pressed until the scent was absorbed into the fat. The petals were then removed and replaced with fresh ones, and the process was repeated (Forbes, 1964; Dayagi-Mendels, 1989). This method was used in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (Before Christ) to extract cypress and myrtle (Brun, 2000). It was not effective, however, for all aromatic products, but only for certain types of plants such as jasmine, roses and tuberose (Dayagi-Mendels, 1989; Reinarz, 2014).

The third method is known as hot maceration. Heat source was applied to both the excipient and the aromatic substances. The oil was again in a solution of astringent substances to which wine and water had been added. The aromatic plant or resin was then immersed in the mixture and heated. Jars containing this mixture were sometimes heated in vats of boiling water rather than over open flames, to prevent evaporation and to prevent the perfume from absorbing the odours of smoke or burning fire. Once the aromas had infused the base, they were filtered and decanted (Forbes, 1964; Dayagi-Mendels, 1989). As a result, the perfumes had varying consistencies. Hot infusion was more complex than cold infusion, but it was more effective and less time-consuming, and involved the same combination of substances, but mixed with hot oil. This appears to have been the most common form of perfume production.

The technology required to produce perfumes was uncomplicated and could be replicated anywhere in the Roman Empire. The crucial factors in production, however, were knowledge and capital. Perfumeries were located in the centre of cities such as Rome, Alexandria, Delos, Paestum, Pozzuoli, and Capua, demonstrating the importance of perfumes in society (Mattingly, 1990; Stewart, 2007; Lawrence, 2019).

Besides the cultivation of flowers and other natural sources, the perfume trade

required the work and collaboration of many diverse professions such as the manufacture of containers in ceramics, alabaster, glass, and metals; the services of traders and merchants for the ingredients and the transport of the finished product (Lawrence, 2019; Hammoud, 2024).

Once produced in large quantities, perfumed ointments were stored in individual containers for preservation, transport and sale to customers (Figure 1). Pliny mentions the virtues of alabaster as a material for perfume bottles, along with lead, as both substances protected the ointments from the light and heat to which they were particularly vulnerable (Mahmoud Ibrahiem, 2025; Gorin-Rosen, 2025).

A Roman pound is equivalent to 327.17 grams and since 1 ounce is equivalent to 28.35 grams, a pound is equivalent to 11.56 ounces. Now, a fluid ounce is equivalent to 0.0296 litres, therefore 11.56 ounces correspond to 342.20 milliliters. That is a lot of perfume, even today.

The term “nard” mentioned by Judas, at that time referred not only to perfumes made from Indian spikenard, but also to those made with other fragrances. Pliny mentions nine different types of plants used to imitate spikenard. Maria Valtorta does not mention “nard” but tuberose and other essences, in agreement with Pliny.



**Figure 1.** Woman with a small amphora perfume. Villa Farnesina, National Museum, Rome (Giordano & Casale, 1992).

## 5. The Value of the *Denarius*

The *denarius* was the standard silver coin in the Roman Empire until about 240

AD (Scheidel & Friesen, 2009). A *denarius* weighed 4.5 grams and originally almost entirely made of silver (Harl, 1996). How much were 300 denarii worth? Considering Sabbaths and other Jewish holidays, the annual working days in Judea, Samaria and Galilee were approximately 285 (Appendix A). The daily wage of a farm labourer was 1 denarius per day (Mattehw, 29, 1-16; Rops, 1968), therefore, 300 denarii was 5% more than the annual salary. Information on wages at the time is scarce, but we know well those of the military, **Table 1** (Watson, 1969, Speidel, 1992; Alston, 1994; Goldsworthy, 2003).

**Table 1.** Annual salary of Legionaries in the Roman Army at the time of Augustus. The *sestertius* was worth  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a *denarius*. Legionaries were Roman citizens who retired after 20 years of service.

	Sestertii	Denarii
<i>Miles legionis</i>	900	225.0
<i>Eques legionis</i>	1050	262.5
<i>Centurio legionis</i>	13,500	3375.0
<i>Primus ordo</i>	27,000	6750.0
<i>Primus Pilus</i>	54,000	13500.0

It is interesting to note that the centurion (*centurio legionis*) earned ten times more than a farm labourer, so it is understandable why the centurion of Capernaum could finance the construction of the local synagogue (Luke 7: 1-10, EMV, 177).

## 6. Travelling in the Mediterranean

Ancient Mediterranean travellers had an ambivalent attitude toward the sea. The sea could guarantee rapid travel and efficient trade, with ships carrying food and goods, imports and communications, and a likely quick return home. But the sea could also be a source of terrifying events: storms, shipwrecks, drownings (Golvin & Reddé, 2016).

The maritime year was divided roughly into four periods: from June to September, navigation was considered easy; from March to May and in October, caution was required especially because of equinoctial storms; from November to February, the seas were “closed”. However, local coastal navigation was possible year-round.

A multitude of small sailing merchant ships and large vessels plied the Mediterranean, conducting local coastal trade by connecting the various ports. Since there were no ships designed to carry passengers, travellers could reserve a place depending on circumstances and availability on a trade vessel, which could be simply a large coastal vessel or a merchant ship. Small vessels were used only for short coastal voyages.

**Table 2** lists few examples of sea voyages in the eastern Mediterranean, with

distance and duration of voyage (Reece, 2025). Reece considered the many factors that could influence the distance and duration of the sea voyage, such as the navigability of the type of vessel used, whether the vessel would sail close to the coast or in the open sea, and the effects of seasonal weather conditions, wind direction and speed, and currents.

The distance travelled by a ship between two ports was not the length of a straight line connecting them. Roman ships sailing the Mediterranean exploited networks of closely spaced ports along the coasts and island chains, supplemented by a few longer open-sea crossings. They regularly followed established sailing routes, documented by ancient sources, which were systematically established over time by observing normal wind and current conditions. They generally avoided sailing too close to the coast in shallow waters.

**Table 2.** Examples of sea voyages, with distance and duration, in the Eastern Mediterranean (Reece, 2025).

Sea Journey	Distance (km)	Time (days)	Distance per day
Miletus to Tyre	1200	9.0	133.3
Ephesus to Caesarea	1082	6.2	174.5
Patara (Lycia) to Tyre	740	4.5	164.4
Attalea (Lydia) to Seleucia	630	3.4	185.3
Cenchreae (Argolis) to Ephesus	430	2.6	165.4
Seleucia to Salamis (Cyprus)	236	2.3	102.6
Tyre to Ptolemais	55	0.4	137.5

Modern travelers and scholars are astonished by the paradoxically small size of ancient harbour basins, a fact that is deeply perplexing, given their ancient maritime glories. To study ancient ports, scholars have had to begin by tracing the connection between harbour silting and coastal progradation, to explain their disappearance. The study of ancient ports demonstrates that this has posed a real problem in coastal management since antiquity.

The sea voyage I will reconstruct below took place in January 33 AD along the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean, as was the custom for winter sailing 2000 years ago. The chronology was established by De Caro, based on the many observations reported in the EMV on the lunar phases, the sight of constellations and other details related to Jewish religious festivals. It can be found in (Matricciani & De Caro, 2017; De Caro et al., 2023; De Caro et al., 2024).

## 7. The Journey of John of Endor and Syntyche

According to the EMV, Syntyche is a runaway Greek slave of a Roman nobleman,

Valerian. Mary Magdalene knows Valerian, whom she had met before her conversion, and considers him one of the richest, dirtiest, and cruelest of the Romans in the retinue of the proconsul Pontius Pilate (EMV, 254, 255). According to slavery laws, she must be returned to her Roman master. Jesus takes her in, hiding her among his disciples. A woman named Syntyche is mentioned in Paul's Letter to the Philippians (Dahl, 1995), probably written between 60 and 62 AD. So, if this is the Syntyche of the journey, about 30 years after the events narrated here, she would have been 50 years old, an age that might justify her role as a leader in the church at Philippi.

John of Endor, an elderly Jewish teacher, had stabbed his wife's lover, a Roman, as a young man (EMV, 188). The Roman died, he lost an eye in the struggle, his property was confiscated and he was sentenced to life imprisonment. He healed the daughter of a guard, a fact that earned him his friendship and a measure of freedom, which he used to escape, even knowing that the guard would pay with his life for his escape. Jesus meets him in a humble house near Endor, in Galilee, about 9 km south-east of Nazareth (Hopfen, 1995). This character is never mentioned in the New Testament.

Jesus is informed that the Sanhedrin knows that among his disciples are notorious sinners (Mary Magdalene), tax collectors (Matthew), condemned men (John of Endor), uncircumcised men (a character named Ermasteus), and pagan women (Syntyche) (EMV, 282). Lazarus believes that Judas of Keriot is the spy who reports to the Sanhedrin. Now, a rabbi of Israel cannot have such people among his disciples. To avoid causing pain to them, Jesus prefers to dismiss them without Judas' knowledge and asks Lazarus for advice. Lazarus first suggests his home in Bethany as a hiding place and then, after Jesus' remarks on possible problems he and his sisters might have, suggests his home in Antioch, Syria.

(EMV, 285) «“In Syria, ... I still have a few little houses, guarded by a steward more faithful than a sheep. Our old Philip! [...] Oh! it is not a palace! It is a house where only Philip lives with a nephew who takes care of the Antigonia gardens. My mother's beloved gardens. We have kept them as a memory of her. She had brought there the plants from her Jewish gardens, with rare essences...”»

Now we are ready to follow the apostles in their journey.

### 7.1. From Ptolemais to Tyre

Peter, together with Andrew, James, John, Judas and James sons of Alphaeus (cousins of Jesus), Matthew, Simon the Zealot, John of Endor and Syntyche, arrive in Ptolemais (known also as Akko, Acre, in modern Israel) on a donkey-drawn cart, coming from Nazareth and Iftael, the latter village being about 17 km away and described precisely (EMV, 315). It is December 31, 32. Peter searches for a boat for the sea voyage to Tyre, about 55 km north of Ptolemais, from where they will set out for Seleucia Pieria (Roman Syria, now in modern Türkiye) on a larger ship. After passing the night, next morning—January 1, 33—they set out for Tyre. We read:

(EMV, 318; written on November 3, 1945) «The few boats in the harbour do not stir. They are so still that they seem to be nailed on a solid substance, and the few strips of cloth stretched out on the high decks, ensigns or garments, whatever they may be, are hanging motionless. From a narrow street in the working-class neighborhood of the port, the apostles are coming towards the marina with the two men headed for Antioch. I do not know what has happened to the donkey and the cart [...] They move quickly among the people who are mostly returning from the markets with their groceries, or who, if they are seafarers, are hurrying to the port to load or unload their ships, or repair them, as needed. [...] Peter heads not for the *large pier* [the emphasis is mine] but, via a creaking gangway, for the *smaller pier, a small curved pier that serves as a second, much smaller dock for fishing boats.*»

Once they have rented a boat, they are ready to embark and set sail for Tyre.

«The boat moves smoothly and quickly, despite being heavily weighted, skimming the sides of the large vessels [...] And then, there is the open sea, outside the breakwaters... Ptolemais passes before the eyes of the sailors, stretched out as it is on the shore, with the port south of the city.»

The ship arrives at a small port, south of the isthmus of Tyre, in the night, after a huge storm.

«[...] They thus reach Tyre where they land without any difficulty in the *little port, south of the isthmus*, lit up by lamps hanging from many boats, with the help also of people present there. While Peter and James remain in the boat to look after the chests, the others, with a man from another boat, go to a hotel to rest.»

## 7.2. From Tyre to Seleucia Pieria

The next morning, January 2, 33, Peter is in the small port where they had arrived the evening before.

(EMV, 319; written on November 4, 1945) «He [Peter] stands up as well, looking at the ships *on the other side*, visible with their high superstructures, especially when the wave lifts their vessel with a seesaw motion. They watch, studying the various vessels, guessing... The port comes to life with people. Peter asks a boatman, or the like, who is busy on the dock: “Do you know if there is in the port, *that port over there*, the ship of [...] Nicomedes Philadelphius son of Philip, a Cretan from Paleocaster...” [...] “See that *ship over there*, the highest one, with flying colours? That is his ship. He will sail before the sixth hour. [...] You don’t want to load the boat onto the ship too?” “No, of course!” “Then there is room in the docks for guards and men to guard them until your return. A coin a day until you return. Because I think you will have to return...” “Certainly, certainly. We will go and come back after seeing the state of Lazarus’ gardens, that’s all.” [...] “Come in the boat, while going to the basin, I will tell you...” and he [Peter] goes away with the man and James, rowing in the *canal towards the docks.*»

After leaving the boat in custody, they head towards the main port.

«Crossing the *narrow isthmus*, they crossed to the *other port* carrying the chests

on their shoulders. The man from Tyre, familiar as he is with the place, takes them through the narrow passages between piles of bales of goods under very wide sheds, to the powerful ship of the Cretan, who is already maneuvering for the next departure, and he calls to those on board to lower the gangway they have raised.»

Finally, before noon (“sixth hour”), they set out for the port of Seleucia Pieria—the port of Antioch—about 340 km north of Tyre. They encounter a terrifying storm at the latitude of Beritus (Beirut), distant 75 km from Tyre, where they arrive in the morning of January 3.

(EMV, 320; written on November 5, 1945) «I cannot figure out where we are, because there’s nothing but sea around us and a distant coast that appears very mountainous, real mountains, not hills. I would say we [“we”! because Maria Val-torta is always on the “scene”] have been sailing for more than a day, because *it is clearly morning*, given that the sun, appearing and disappearing from very thick clouds, is still coming from the east. I think *the ship is making very little progress* despite the buffeting it’s subjected to. And the sea seems to be getting rougher and rougher. With a frightening crash, a piece of mast comes off,—I do not know the exact name of this part of the mast—and in falling, now dragged by an avalanche of water that rushes onto the deck together with a real whirlwind, it knocks off a piece of the bulwark. [...] “[Nicodemus] We are just off Colonia Giulia, or Beritus [Beirut], if you prefer. And now comes the worst part... Those are the mountains of Lebanon.” “And couldn’t you enter that country there?” “A bad harbour, with breakers and rocks.”»

From the latitude of Beiruth they set sail for Seleucia, where they arrive at sunset on January 4, after having sailed for about 265 km.

(EMV, 321; written on November 6, 1945) «In a beautiful sunset the city of Seleucia stands out like a large white mass at the edge of the blue waters of the sea [...] The ship, with sails unfurled, heads quickly toward the distant city [...]»

Nicomedes invites the apostles to go to the bow to observe the approaching city up close.

(EMV, 321) «“Look, do you see? Have you ever been here?” “I was once. But coming by land,” says the Zealot, serious and firm. [Nicomedes] “Ah! good! But then you know that the true port of Antioch is Seleucia, on the sea, at the mouth of the Orontes, which also lends itself graciously to receiving ships and, in times of deep water, can be navigated by light boats up to Antioch. The one you see is Seleucia, the larger one. The other, towards the south, is not a city, but the *ruins of a devastated place*. They deceive, but it is a *dead town*. That mountain range is the Pierian Mountains, which gives the city Seleucia the name Pieria. That peak further inland, beyond the plain, is Mount Casius, which towers like a giant over the plain of Antioch. The other mountain range to the north is the Amanus. Oh! you will see what works the Romans did in Seleucia and Antioch! They could not have done anything bigger. A *port with three basins*, one of the best, and canals, and jetties, and dams. There is not one like it in Palestine. But Syria is better than other provinces of the Empire...” »

After disembarking from the ship, they look for a hotel.

### 7.3. From Seleucia Pieria to Antioch

On the morning of January 5, they looked for a cart to reach Antioch, about 40 km away, following the road that partly runs alongside the Orontes River.

(EMV, 322: no date) «“In the markets you will certainly find a cart. But if you want my cart, I’ll give it to you, in memory of Theophilus [...]” says the old innkeeper, standing before the apostles in the *early morning sun*. [...] They cross a square indicated to them and take a road near the walls, until they exit through a gate, first skirting a canal bed and then the river itself. It is a beautiful, well-maintained road, heading northeast, but following the bends of the river. On the other side are very green mountains with their slopes, inlets, and ravines, and already the bushes of the undergrowth, in the sunniest spots, can be seen sprouting the buds of a thousand shrubs.

“How many myrtles!”, exclaims Syntyche. “And laurels! adds Matthew. Near Antioch there is a place sacred to Apollo” says John of Endor. “[...] this whole place is full of beautiful plants,” says the Zealot. “You who have been there, do you think we will pass by Daphne?” “Of course. You will see one of the most beautiful valleys in the world. Aside from the obscene cult that has degenerated into increasingly sordid orgies, it is a valley of earthly paradise [...]”.

The horse trots in a measured rhythm [...]. The road therefore moves quite quickly, until they stop at a bridge to eat and let the horse rest. The sun is at *mid-day*, and the beauty of nature’s enchanting beauty is fully visible.

[...] They get back on the cart and, crossing the bridge, take the other bank of the river, the other road that goes straight towards Antioch, through a very fertile area. “There it is! In that poetic valley is Daphne with its temple and its groves. And there, in that plain, is Antioch and its *towers on the walls*. We will enter through the *gate that is near the river*. Lazarus’ house *is not far from the walls*. The most beautiful houses have been sold. This one remains [...] Now Philip lives there. [...] And together we will go to Antigonía, where was the house lived in by Euchería and her children, then children...”. “This city is very fortified, isn’t it?” Peter asks [...]. “A great deal. *Walls of grandiose height and width, over a hundred towers* that, you see, seem like giants standing on the walls, and impassable moats at their base. Even the Silpius has placed its peaks to aid the defense and buttress the walls in the most delicate section... Here is the gate.” *A short street then a sturdy and simple house*, that is, a high wall without windows. Only a large door in the center of the wall. [...] The cart stops in a large, well-kept porticoed courtyard, with four large plane trees at the four corners and two in the centre, protecting a well and a trough for watering the horses. [...] [The superintendent speaks] “Oh! Rooms for pilgrims are always ready” [...] They open the shutters of the rooms they choose. Opposite them on one side are the *walls and fortresses of Antioch*; the tranquil courtyard decorated with *climbing roses, currently sparse due to the season*, is visible from the others on the other side.»

## 7.4. From Antioch to Antigonía

After a brief stop in Antioch, they set out by cart to Antigonía, the final destination of John of Endor and Syntyche.

(EMV, 323; written on November 7, 1945) «And preceded by Tolmai's cart [...] they trot towards Antigonía [...] The town is soon reached. Immersed in the lushness of its gardens, sheltered from the winds by the surrounding mountain ranges, far enough away not to oppress it but *close enough to protect it* and to pour upon it the scents of its forests of resinous and essential plants, all bathed in sunlight, it gladdens the eye and the heart just by passing through. The gardens of Lazarus are to the south of the town and are preceded by a currently *bare avenue*, along which stand the gardeners' houses. Low but well-kept houses, from whose doors peep the faces of children and women who watch curiously and wave with smiles. The different races appear in the diversity of faces [there were about 30 people, including infants].

Tolmai, as soon as he passes through the gate that marks the entrance to the property, makes a special whip crack as he passes each house; it must be like a sign. And the inhabitants of each house, after observing, enter their homes and then exit, closing the doors and walking along the avenue behind the two carts, which move at a walk and then stop at the *center of a network of paths running in every direction like the spokes of a wheel, between fields and fields planted with flowerbeds*, some bare, some perennial in their greenery, watched over by laurels, acacias or similar plants, and other trees that, from cuts made in the trunk, release fragrant milk and resins. A mixed *odor of balsamic, resinous, and aromatic scents* hangs in the air. Beehives are everywhere. And *irrigation tanks* where very white pigeons drink. And in special areas, on the bare, freshly dug earth, pure white hens scratch around, watched over by young girls.»

In conclusion, Lazarus' family cultivated a variety of flowers and aromatic plants on a large scale on their family estate in Antigonía. The property was a farm that supplied raw materials to the local perfume industry. Very likely, the farm itself produced perfumes, but not in January, due to a shortage of flowers and other raw materials. When Lazarus, Martha, and Mary were children, the family lived in Antioch and Antigonía, and the farm was managed by their mother, Euchería, with the help of farmers.

We are now ready to summarize the information that archaeologists and historians know about the ancient ports visited by the apostles and compare it with what Maria Valtorta narrates.

## 8. The Port of Ancient Ptolemais

Ptolemais (Akko, Acre) was an ancient fortified port city in the Eastern Mediterranean, active for thousands of years because its bay is protected from north and west winds by the promontory, which provides a natural anchorage. During the Roman period, until the construction of the port of Caesarea Maritima, after 10 BC, the port of Ptolemais was the most important gateway to Europe and Rome.

Around 37 BC, it became a Roman colony. Its strategic location and the importance of its port prompted the Romans to expand it (Dothan & Raban, 1980; Raban, 1983; Killebrew et al., 2017).

The port had two basins: the eastern basin, with a long pier, and the western basin, protected by the breakwater built by the Romans (Figure 2). The western basin was used especially by fishermen (Galli et al., 2007; Galili et al., 2010; Artzy, 2012; Giaime et al., 2019; Galili & Arenson, 2014).

In Section 7.1, we read that Peter docks not at a large pier, but at a small, *curved pier* that serves as a second, much smaller mooring for fishing boats. Maria Valtorta clearly describes the western basin (Figure 2). There, Peter rents a boat.

On January 1, 32, in Ptolemais and Tyre sunrise was around 6:45 and sunset around 16:45. The next scene is early in the morning, after sunrise, because the apostles are moving quickly among the people returning from the markets and the sailors rushing to the port to load or unload their ships. In other words, the day's work had just begun, at least by 1 hour to allow people to shop, therefore they sailed at about 8 - 9.



**Figure 2.** Aerial view of Ptolemais with indicated the ancient western port, the ancient eastern port, the long pier with the remains of a tower, and the Roman breakwaters (both submerged), indicated by the yellow pins. Notice the small curved pier in the ancient western basin, mentioned by Maria Valtorta, and the larger ancient eastern basin, largely silted up due to the progradation of the coastline. The ancient western basin is also partially silted up.

When they set sail for Tyre, Maria Valtorta mentions the open sea beyond the breakwaters. Ptolemais passes before the sailors' eyes, stretched out on the shore, with its harbour south of the city. In other words, after leaving the western basin heading to the south for the open sea, they turn west, skirt the breakwaters, and then head north. Now, Ptolemais glides before their eyes. It appears that Maria Valtorta described the ship's route by looking at the aerial photograph in **Figure 2**.

The arrival in Tyre occurred after sunset because the «the small port, south of the isthmus, was lit by lamps hanging from many boats» and some apostles «with a man from another boat, go to a hotel to rest». Now, according to **Table 2**, a modern estimate of the minimum sailing time for the reverse journey, from Tyre to Ptolemais, is  $0.4 \times 24 = 9.6 \approx 10$  hours. The journey by boat must have taken a little more than 10 hours because in the first part of the journey they had to row because there was no wind. In any case, even this minimum interval would coincide with an arrival after sunset, between 18 and 19, when it is already dark in January.

## 9. The Port of Ancient Tyre

Tyre was founded on a small coastal island. Its coastline today is characterized by a tombolo—a strip of sand or gravel connecting an island to the adjacent coast—a peculiar sandy isthmus connecting the ancient island settlement to the mainland.

In 332 BC, Alexander the Great conquered the city after building a causeway 700 - 1000 meters long and 60 meters wide, dug into waters up to 5.4 meters deep (Marriner & Morhange, 2005; Marriner et al., 2007; Marriner & Morhange, 2008; Marriner et al., 2008; Marriner et al., 2023). The causeway disrupted the transport of sand along the coast, forcing sand to accumulate against and over the causeway, thus creating a sandy isthmus, which inflated during the centuries and reshaped the eastern coast of Tyre island. Today, its width is 530 m at its narrowest, and it rises 13 m above sea level (**Figure 3**) (Noureddine, 2019; Brocard et al., 2024; De Graauw et al., 2024).

The port of Tyre had two harbours, one north of the isthmus, known as the Phoenician Harbour, and the other to the south, known as the Egyptian Harbour (**Figure 3**). The ancient northern harbour was larger than today because part of it is silted up. The southern harbour had two entrances serving two separate basins (Marriner et al., 2008; Goiran et al., 2021) and was characterised by breakwaters, now submerged 150 meters from the current coastline. The Phoenician Harbour was the port for vessels, the Egyptian Harbour for boats or small vessels. The latter port was an offshore anchorage rather than an artificial harbour installation (Franco, 1996; Frost, 2005; Aliquot, 2017; Goiran et al., 2021).

The isthmus grew in volume and width over time. The sand accumulated after the construction of the causeway, over a period of 6 - 10 centuries, so that the isthmus reached its current dimensions between 300 and 700 AD (Brocard et al., 2024), therefore, in the first decades of the 1st century AD, it was less wide than today.



**Figure 3.** Aerial view of Tyre, showing the ancient northern and southern harbours, indicated by the yellow pins. The black horizontal line indicates the path of the causeway built by Alexander the Great (332 BC). The minimum width of the isthmus is 530 m.

Maria Valtorta clearly describes the two different ports of Tyre, because upon their arrival, the boat docks in a small port south of the isthmus—the southern harbour—while the next morning they set sail to Seleucia from the northern harbour on Nicomedes’ vessel. In fact, Peter looks at the vessels on the *other side* of the isthmus, where he sees large vessels with their tall superstructures, and asks about Nicomedes’ vessel, which should be *in the port, that port over there*. Peter is clearly pointing to the northern port.

After leaving the boat in custody, they headed for the northern port. Crossing the narrow isthmus, they reached the other port, carrying the chests on their shoulders. The crossing must have been short, as they were carrying considerable weights on their shoulders. Therefore, it is very likely that Maria Valtorta describes an isthmus narrower than the current 530 meters.

We can roughly calculate the width of the isthmus in the year 33 AD, when the alleged voyage took place. Considering a linear increase in its width, we need to estimate the minimum width after  $332 + 33 = 365$  years—332 BC is the year of the construction of the causeway 60 m wide—assuming that the width reached its present width (530 m) between 300 AD and 700 AD. We get the interval of the

minimum width  $w$  (meters):

$$w_{33AD} = 60 + \frac{530 - 60}{(332 + 300)} \times 365 = 331$$

$$w_{33AD} = 60 + \frac{530 - 60}{(332 + 700)} \times 365 = 226$$

Therefore, the width could vary between 226 and 331 metres. Now, the walking speed of adult males carrying baggage is estimated to be about 1 m/s (3.6 km/h) (Mohamad Ali et al., 2018), so they could have crossed the isthmus in between 3.8 and 5.5 minutes.

## 10. The Ancient Port of Seleucia in Pieria

Before the foundation of Seleucia in Pieria by Seleucus I, the main port connecting the Mediterranean world with the cities of northern Syria and the Euphrates Valley was Al Mina, situated at the mouth of the Orontes. However, this harbour—which was the most obvious site for a port serving Antioch—was unsuitable for large ships, so new ports were built. One was in Laodicea, the other in Seleucia in Pieria, about 9 km north of the mouth of the Orontes.

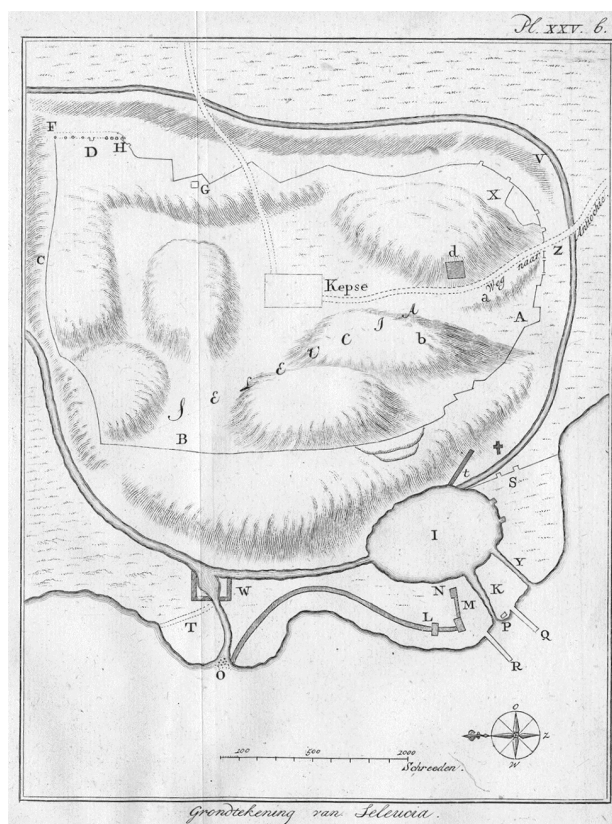


**Figure 3.** Aerial view of Seleucia Pieria, showing the inner harbour, completed silted up, and the exterior harbour, indicated by the yellow pins.





**Figure 5.** Aerial view of the inner harbour (red line) completely silted up (Pamir, 2014). ODAP Archive of the Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development, <https://www.odap.gr/en/services/>.



**Figure 6.** A plan of Seleucia, reproduced from (Pococke, 1745) showing the inner harbour ("I"), with two canals leading to it ("Y", "K"), two piers ("R", "Q"), the outer harbour ("O"). Notice that the two piers make a small port.

As we can read in Section 7.2, Maria Valtorta describes Seleucia and its three harbours as they were 2,000 years ago: the inner harbour/lagoon, with canals and piers forming another port, and the outer port. She knows that Seleucia is the largest city; the other, to the south, is not a city but the ruins of a dead city, Palepaolis (Figure 4). She knows that the Romans developed a port with three basins, built canals, piers, and dams (Figure 4). She also knows that the port of Antioch is not at the mouth of the Orontes (which would make its location more obvious for serving Antioch) and that only during periods of deep water can the Orontes River be navigated by light vessels to Antioch.

Nicomedes's vessel arrived at Seleucia Pieria at sunset (17:00) on January 4 after sailing 265 km from a position at the latitude of Beirut, where they were in the morning of January 3. Assuming they left the latitude of Beirut at sunrise (about 7:00) and sailed in very good weather, the sea voyage lasted  $24 + 12 = 36$  hours, at the average speed of 7.4 km/h, or 176.7 km/day, in agreement with the speeds reported in Table 2 for long journeys.

## 11. From Seleucia Pieria to Antioch and to Antigonía

From Section 7.4, we know that flowers and other resinous plants were grown on Lazarus's property, certainly not to adorn his many homes, but to extract essences for perfume production.

The EMV does not contain explicit information on how the perfumes were produced, but it seems clear to me that the farm supplied the raw materials to the perfumers, or even that the perfumes were produced there. Maria Valtorta does not "see" people using the equipment discussed in Section 4, most likely because the perfumes could not be produced in January due to a shortage of flowers and other raw materials. This large-scale operation and/or close contact with those who produced the final product would explain why Mary owned such "a wholesaler's amount" of very expensive perfume. Now, was Lazarus' farm an isolated initiative in Antigonía? What was grown in the Antioch area?

Antioch, like Seleucia, was founded by Seleucus I in 307 BC (Ladynin, 2020; Grainger, 1990). It was one of the most important Greek cities of the Hellenistic period, the capital of the Seleucid Empire and a member of the league of four sister cities (Tetropolis) with Laodicea, Seleucia, and Apamea. Antioch was famous for its use and production of perfumes (Bouchier, 1921; Downey, 1961; De Giorgi & Eger, 2021; De Giorgi, 2016).

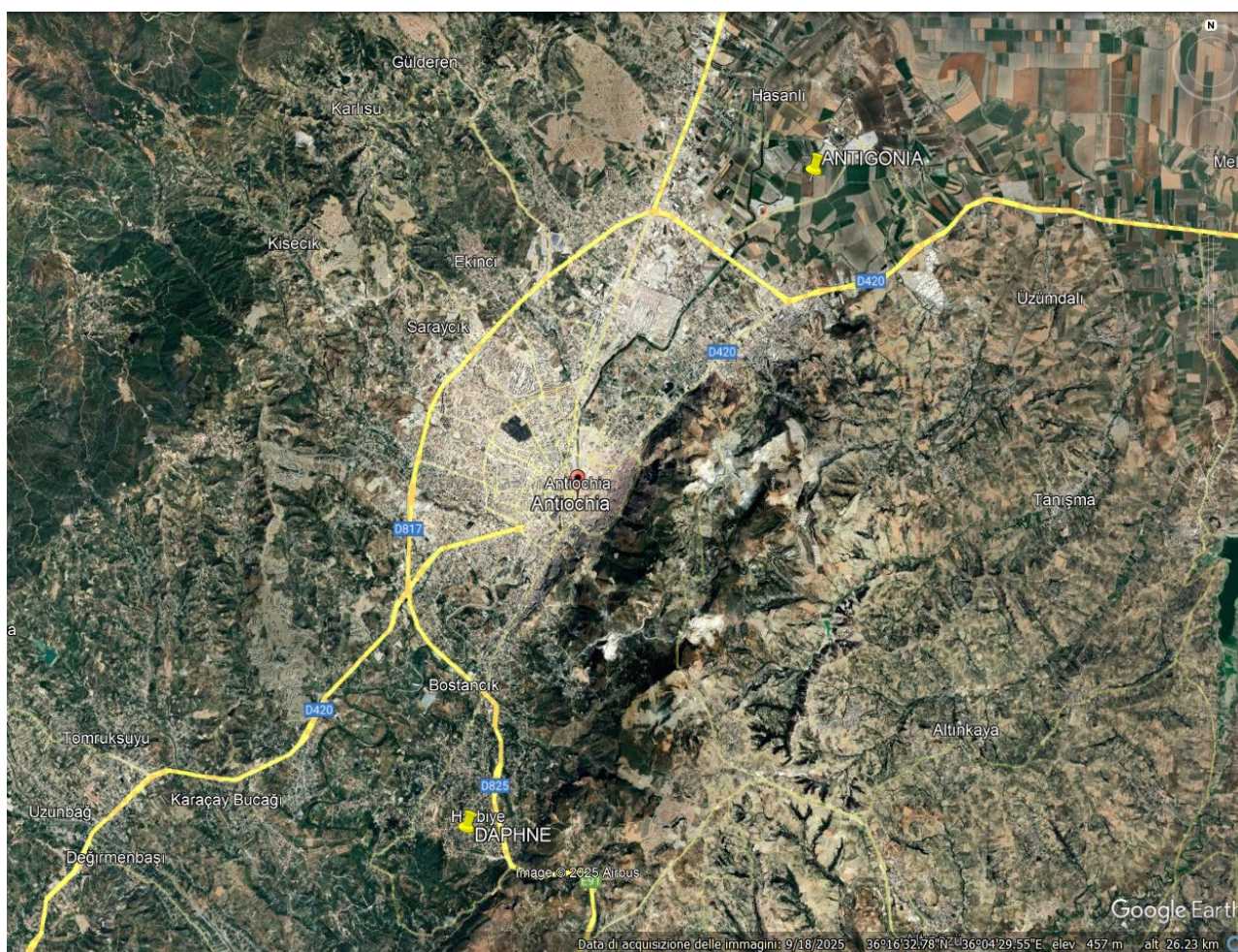
The city (modern-day Antakya) stands at the southwestern edge of the Amuk plain, built on the left bank of the Orontes River (Figure 7), which split into two streams enclosing a nearly circular island (Figure 8). The river then flowed under the stone bridge where the Bridge Gate was located: this is the gate through which the road from Seleucia arrived (Figure 8, Figure 9). Foreigners were impressed by the city walls with their numerous, heavily fortified towers, between three and four hundred (Bouchier, 1921; Downey, 1961).

The mountains lining the river's left bank extend from the sea to Antioch, at

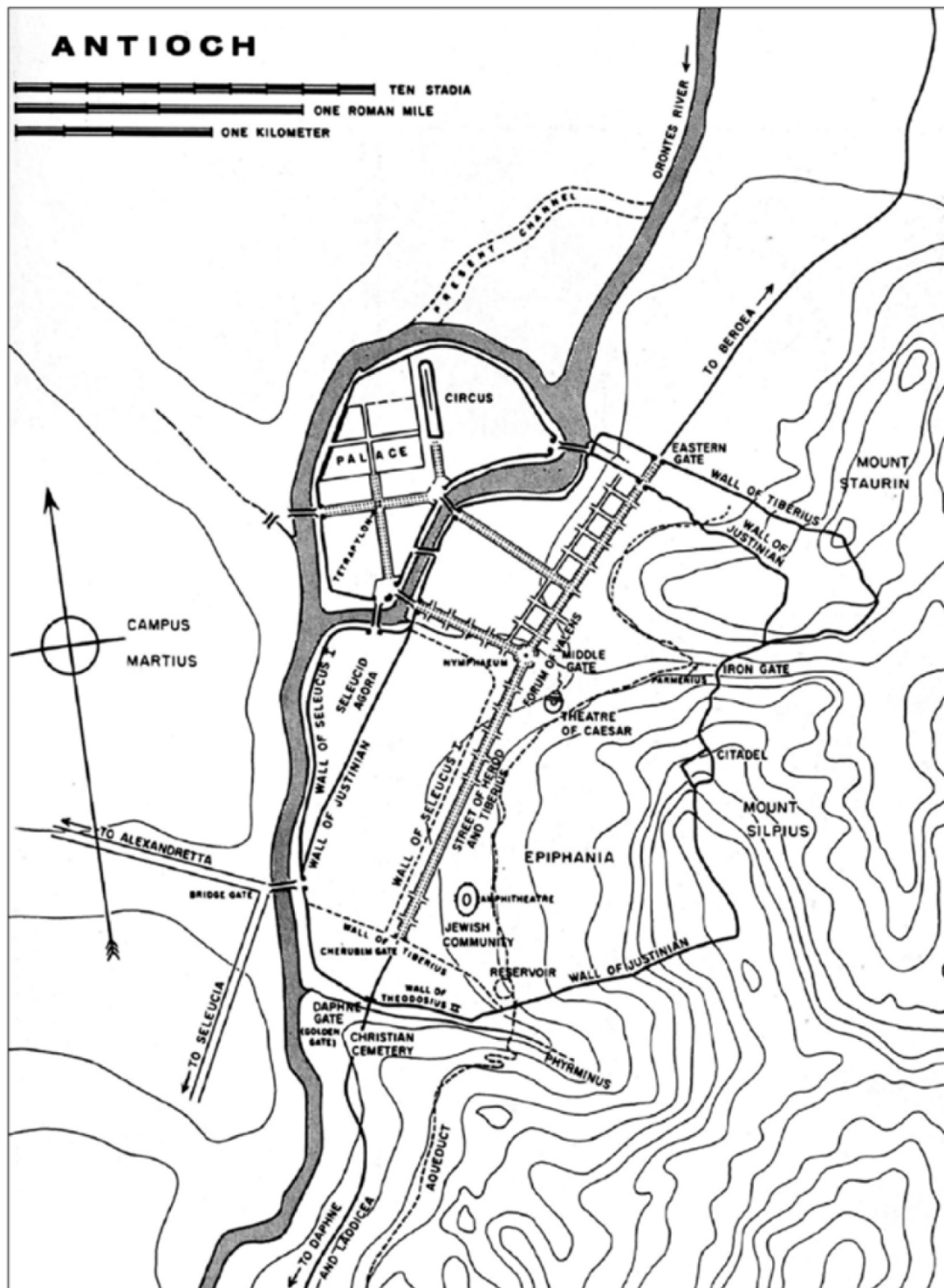
Mount Silpius (506 m above sea level). Beyond the stone bridge (Bridge Gate), which bordered the main northern outlet, the river flowed along the wooded slopes below Daphne and the steeper heights of the northeaster foothills of Mount Casius. The surrounding hills were covered with myrtle, and the rich alluvial plain around the river was the main factor in the city's prosperity.

In the early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the river was navigable. Thanks to its location, the city controlled the river and the road network between Syria, Anatolia, and the southern countries, and between the Mediterranean and the upper Euphrates.

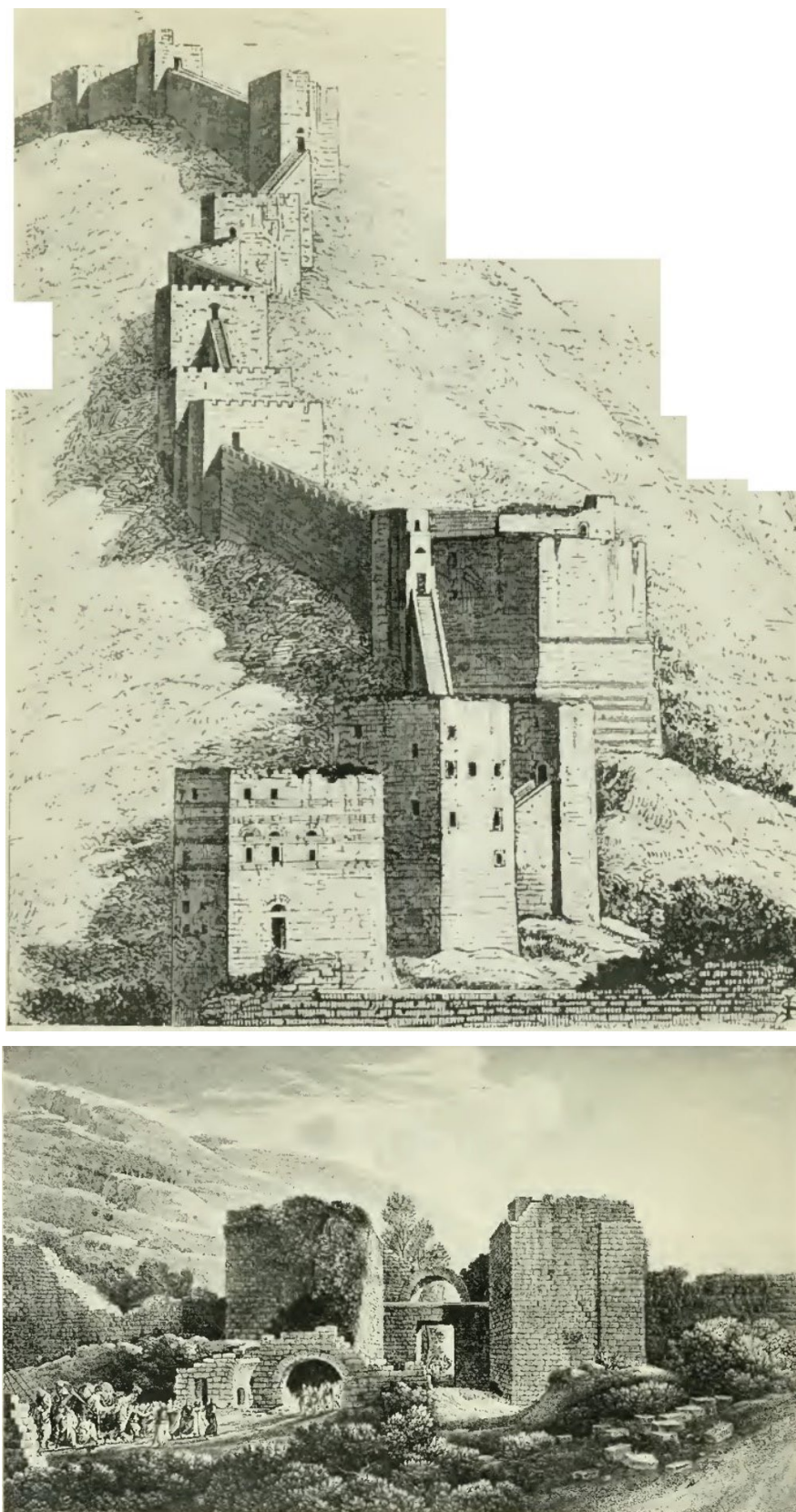
Seleucus I had destroyed the capital of his rival Antigonos, Antigonía, also on the Orontes River, about 7 km to the northeast, and had transported many stones along the Orontes to build the two new cities of Antioch and Seleucia, where most of the inhabitants were also deported. Malas explicitly reports, from Pausanias of Antioch, that: «After having razed Antigonía, Seleucus transferred the Athenians [i.e., Greeks] who lived in Antigonía to the great city of Antioch that he had built.» (Garstad, 2011).



**Figure 7.** Aerial view of modern Antioch (Antakya). The yellow pin along the Orontes, to the northeast, indicates the probable location of Antigonía, «sheltered from the winds by the surrounding mountain ranges, far enough away not to oppress it but *close enough to protect it*». Daphne was at about the same distance from Antioch centre, on the plateau, modern Harbyie south-west.



**Figure 8.** Map of Antioch (Downey, 1961). The road from Seleucia ends at the Bridge Gate. The Jewish community, where Lazarus' house most likely stood, is located about 500 meters from the Gate. The walls present at the time of Jesus are those of Seleucus I. Note the island formed by the two branches of the Orontes River. The road to Daphne and Laodicea is indicated at the bottom; the road to Antigonía, exiting through the Eastern Gate, towards Beroea, is indicated at the top.



**Figure 9.** Upper panel: The walls and fortified towers of Antioch as they climb the slopes of Mount Silpius. Lower panel: The Bridge Gate (Bouchier, 1921).

Daphne, a suburb of Antioch located about 8 km southwest of the city, on the first plateau overlooking the Orontes River and the plain, was so famous that Antioch was called “Antioch near Daphne”. The road between the two cities was lined with villas, gardens, inns, and all manner of pleasant places. There were extensive vineyards, rose gardens, plantations, streams, and cypress trees interspersed with other plants. Beneath the trees, the land produced all kinds of fragrant flowers as the seasons changed. The famous procession to Daphne included women pouring perfume from 200 golden vases. It was made fertile and beautiful by numerous natural springs, which not only provided an ample supply of water for the villas, baths, and gardens, but also supplied Antioch itself.

Suburban farms supplied Antioch with olive oil, wine, flowers, and aromatic plants. Antiochian lily oil (called Syrian oil in antiquity) was exported throughout the Roman Empire for medicinal purposes. After Pompey (64 BC), Antioch became the capital of the region and was governed by a Roman-appointed governor. According to the EMV, Theophilus, father of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, had been governor of the city.

After 33 km from Antioch, the Orontes reached the sea a few kilometers south of the port of Seleucia in Pieria. By the beginning of the 1st century AD, the river was navigable from the sea to Antioch. The Romans improved navigation by digging a canal to avoid a dangerous bend.

As read in Section 7.4, the journey from Seleucia to Antioch was made by cart pulled by a draft horse. For this route, Google Maps indicates a minimum walking distance of 38.8 km and a travel time of 9 hours. Now, the speed of a draft horse is between 5 and 7 km/h, so, starting around 7:00 (“first sun”), assuming an average speed of 5 km/h (considering stops), it takes about 8 hours to cover the 38.8 km, which is consistent with an arrival at 15:00.

They arrive at the Bridge Gate (“We will enter by the gate that is on the river”), where the road from Seleucia enters the city. Lazarus’ house was most likely located in the Jewish Quarter, only about 500 meters from this gate (“Lazarus’ house is not far from the walls”) (**Figure 8**).

Upon entering the house, travelers see through the bedroom windows the walls and fortress of Antioch on one side and the courtyard decorated with climbing roses on the other. Therefore, they seem to look east (walls) and west (courtyard, towards the entrance to the house), according to the map (**Figure 8**).

When Lazarus, Martha, and Mary were children, the family lived in Antioch and Antigonía, and the agricultural activity was managed by their mother, Euchería, with the help of farmers. The farm was located south of Antigonía, far enough away not to be oppressed by the hills northeast of Antioch, but protected by them from the winds (see **Figure 7**).

## 12. Summary and Conclusion

In two episodes—Mark (14: 3-5), Luke (7: 36-38), and John (12: 1-5)—Mary Magdalene (sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany) anoints Jesus’ feet with perfumed

oil and dries them with her hair, the first occurred in Capernaum, Galilee, the second in Bethany, Judea. Of this latter episode, John reports both the quantity of perfume—a pound of very costly ointment made from pure nard—and its market value, 300 denarii. The data indicate an unusual possession, as both the quantity and the market value of the nard were very high for a house, albeit one belonging to wealthy people.

Why did Mary have a pound of perfumed ointment of such high commercial value in her home? The first answer that comes to mind is: the perfume was useful for her ancient “profession”, most likely practiced in the baths of Magadala, and she still had a supply of it. However, this answer does not exclude another, which is not an alternative to the first but in agreement with it.

The clues to this second answer are given in *The Gospel as It Was Revealed to Me* in which Maria Valtorta narrates the journey, mostly by sea, of Peter, seven other apostles, John of Endor, and Syntyche—these last two characters are not present in the Gospels—from Ptolemais to Tyre, Seleucia Pieria (Roman Syria), and then to Antioch, where Lazarus’ family owned a house, and finally to nearby Antigonía where they owned a large farm. They cultivated a variety of flowers and aromatic plants on a large scale, most likely to sell them to the local perfume industry, well-established in the Antioch area, or to use them to make their own perfumes. This large-scale operation and/or close contact with those who produced the final product would explain why Mary owned such wholesaler’s amount of very expensive perfume. Maria Valtorta does not “see” the equipment for perfume production because in January the raw materials needed to produce them were lacking.

The port of Ptolemais had two basins, the eastern basin, with a long pier, and the western basin, protected by the breakwater built by the Romans, which Maria Valtorta clearly describes. When the apostles sail to Tyre, Maria Valtorta describes the boat’s route as she were observing aerial photography of Ptolemais or a map. The time travel from Ptolemais to Tyre took a little more than 10 hours, in agreement with the arrival after sunset, between 18 and 19, when it was already dark in January.

Tyre has two harbours, one north of the isthmus, known as the Phoenician Harbour, and the other to the south, known as the Egyptian Harbour. Maria Valtorta clearly describes these two different ports because the ship docks in a small port south of the isthmus—the southern harbour—while the next morning they set sail to Seleucia from the northern harbour, because Nicomedes’ vessel—bound for Seleucia—was indicated “in the port over there”. Peter clearly points to the northern port from the southern port.

Seleucia Pieria had strong fortifying walls punctuated with towers surrounding the artificial lagoon, the so-called inner harbour, today completely silted up, and the exterior harbour situated on the coast with two piers or breakwaters which formed another port (“three ports”).

Maria Valtorta describes Seleucia and its harbour as they were 2,000 years ago.

She knows that the Romans developed a port with three basins, built canals, piers, and dams. She also knows that the port is not located at the mouth of the Orontes (which would be the obvious site to serve Antioch, for a “novelist”) and that only during periods of deep water can the Orontes River be navigated by light vessels, as far as Antioch. She knows that south of Seleucia were the ruins of Palepaolis.

The ship arrived at Seleucia Pieria after a voyage that from the latitude of Beirut took about 36 hours, at the average speed of 7.4 km/h, in agreement with the speeds estimated for long journeys in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The journey of about 39 km walking distance from Seleucia to Antioch was made by cart pulled by a draft horse in about 9 hours, in agreement with Google Maps. The apostles enter in Antioch at the Bridge Gate (“We will enter by the gate that is on the river”), where the road from Seleucia enters the city. Lazarus’ house was most likely located in the Jewish Quarter, only 500 metres from this gate. She knows that it was not far from the Gate (“Lazarus’ house is not far from the walls”).

After a brief stay in Antioch, the apostles reach Lazarus’ large estate in Antigonina, the final destination of John of Endor and Syntyche. Maria Valtorta describes it as a large farm where a variety of flowers and aromatic plants were grown on a large scale. The estate, inhabited by about 30 people, was a farming enterprise that supplied raw materials to the local perfume industry—likely also to themselves—which was well-established in the Antioch region. The farm was located south of Antigonina, far enough away not to be oppressed by the hills northeast of Antioch, but protected by them from the winds (see **Figure 7**). The ruins of Antigonina (razed to the ground 2,300 years ago by Seleucus) after such a long time, numerous earthquakes and silting caused by the Orontes, have likely buried in this area.

The sea voyage from Ptolemais to Tyre and Seleucia Pieria, and the cart journey to Antioch and Antigonina, are described in great detail, corresponding to the real geographical area as it was 2,000 years ago.

Presuming that a mystic’s observations are “data” is, of course, beyond standard archaeological and historical research, but it is impossible to trace her sources because Maria Valtorta certainly had no historical or archaeological atlases, specialized texts, or even popular literature on these topics, as her biography reminds. All the information she reports is known only to archaeologists and historians of these ancient cities and ports.

In conclusion, this study has investigated the biblical account of Mary Magdalene possessing a pound of expensive perfume. It has proposed an explanation derived from the mystical writings of Maria Valtorta: Mary’s family ran a large farm growing flowers and aromatic plants near Antioch, on a large scale. This hypothesis is supported by a strong correspondence between Valtorta’s detailed descriptions of an ancient sea voyage and modern archaeological and historical evidence of the ports and routes involved.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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## Appendix A. Estimate of the Number of Work Days

Let us estimate how many working days there were in the Julian year (365 days) in the Holy Land 2000 years ago, considering Jewish holidays and workers' illnesses. **Table A1** summarizes the calculation. The total number of days off is 80, therefore the annual working days were  $365 - 80 = 285$ .

**Table A1.** Jewish working days in the Julian year 2000 years ago.

Jewish holidays	Days off work
Shabbat	52
Passover	7
Tabernacles	7
Purim	2
Yom Kippur	1
Day of Atonement	1
Pentecost	1
Simchat Torah	1
Trumpets	1
Workers' illnesses (estimated)	7
Total days off	80