

2. Before the Romans

Founding fathers

Foundation myths or histories were an important element of Greek urban identity. The oldest cities claimed to find their founders among the gods or heroes of mythology, often among those who fought at Troy. Those that were products of the great period of Greek colonization focused their origin-identity on the mother city, literally the *mêtropolis*; for instance, many Greek settlements along the Black Sea coast claimed a Milesian origin. The more recent foundations identified their founder as an historical person, often as not giving his own name to the city.

The Hellenistic period was a high season for the foundation of cities. It opened with Alexander the Great, who founded dozens of Alexandrias along his marching route to the east; it closed with the naval victory of Octavian in 31 BC, celebrated by the refoundation of Actium as *Nikopolis*, “the city of victory”.

The city known to antiquity as *Nikaia* and to present-day Turks as Iznik was founded in 311 BC by one of Alexander’s generals and successors, Antigonos Monophtalmos (“the one-eyed”). It was named *Antigoneia* to preserve the memory of its founder – not, as it turned out, for very long: by 301 BC it had been captured by another of Alexander’s generals, Lysimachos, who renamed it *Nikaia* after his queen.¹

Bithynia was one of the many minor kingdoms that emerged from the breakup of Alexander’s empire. A Bithynian noble, Zipoites, declared himself king and inaugurated a new royal era.² In 280, he fell in battle and was succeeded by his son, Nikomedes I. Like his father, the new king was forced to devote most of his energy to wars and dynastic conflicts in an environment of recurrent warfare and constantly shifting alliances. By the 260’s, his foreign policy had proved successful and his dynastic position had been secured by the death of his brothers. In 264 BC, Nikomedes founded a new royal capital bearing his name at the head of what we now know as the gulf of Izmit, easily reached by land or sea from all parts of his kingdom. Such a good position had not gone unnoticed or unexploited, and *Nikomedia* was not created on virgin soil but through a fusion – synoikism – of existing settlements.³

Its name suggests that the third great city of Bithynia, *Prusa*, was founded by a Prusias – as claimed by three ancient writers (Strabon, Arrian of Nikomedia and Stephen of Byzantion)⁴ and on a coin of the late second century

AD bearing the legend “Prusias the founder (*ktistês*) of Prusa” (fig. 2).⁵ But who was he? According to Strabon’s *Geography*, the city was “a foundation of Prusias who fought against Kroisos”, echoed by Stephen’s identification: “Prusias who fought against Kyros”. According to a fragment of Arrian, Prusa was founded by king Prusias, grandson of Nikomedes.

The *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder names Hannibal as the founder of Prusa⁶ – thus indirectly supporting the claim of Arrian. Hannibal left Carthage in 195 BC and sought refuge with Antiochos III. When the Romans asked Antiochos to hand over Hannibal, the Carthaginian fled to Armenia and from there to Bithynia, where he served Prusias I as a naval commander in 188-183 BC. He had previously assisted king Artaxias of Armenia in laying out a new city, Artaxata,⁷ and may well have advised the Bithynian king on the founding of Prusa. Fearing that Prusias would hand him over to the Romans, Hannibal took his own life in 183 BC.

Strabon, on the other hand, identifies Prusa’s founder as “Prusias who fought against Kroisos” which would imply a foundation date in the sixth century BC, but there is no archaeological or epigraphic evidence for such an early date. One way out of this problem is to assume a lacuna in Strabon’s text after “Prusias”, in which case the king who fought Kroisos (or Kyros, as Stephen of Byzantion has it, copying a corrupt version of Strabon) is an entirely different person from the founder of Prusa.⁸

A more probable explanation is that Strabon was reproducing a popular tradition about the origins of Prusa that was current in Asia Minor during his own lifetime. There is little doubt that Prusa was founded by Prusias I, but the historical identity of the founder may have been overlaid by an accretion of legends about a protohistorical and semi-mythical origin. The notion that the founder battled against Kroisos reflects a Prusan self-perception as a frontier city, and the desire to make the city more respectable by moving its foundation date back in time is easy to understand.⁹ A parallel process can be observed in nearby Nikaia, where coins and inscriptions proudly identify the city’s founders as Dionysos and Herakles;¹⁰ throughout the life span of the Nikaian mint, coins were struck with the image of Dionysos as the *ktistês* of Nikaia (fig. 2).¹¹

To Greek thinkers of the classical period, the city, *hê polis*, was also the state, and in a wider sense, society. The founders of a new city could draw on various treatises for advice. Most of these have been lost, but an impression of their content can be gained from a passage in Aristotle’s *Politics*¹² where the practical problems of siting a city are briefly touched upon as prolegomena to a wider discussion about the nature of human society and the relative merits of different constitutions. Aristotle’s advice is worth quoting, not because every later city-founder had a copy of the *Politics* at his elbow, but because they may be taken to reflect prevalent ideas about “best practice” in city planning during the late Classical and early Hellenistic period.

According to Aristotle, the city should be located on sloping ground with easy access “to the sea, the land and its territory”¹³ and a sufficient supply



Fig. 2 Left: Nikaian bronze coin showing the city's founder, Dionysos, returning from India in an elephant quadriga. As an assertion of the city's divine origin and seniority over the other Bithynian cities, Dionysos appears on Nikaian coins from the first century right down to the reign of Gallienus. RGMG 1.3 Nikaia 826 similis (Tom Vossen). Right: Fig. 2b. Prusan bronze coin showing Geta on the obverse and on the reverse a figure identified as "Prusias, the founder of Prusa": RGMG 1.4 Prusa 116. (American Numismatic Society)

of good water.¹⁴ An eastward-facing slope is preferable, a northward orientation acceptable.¹⁵ Aristotle discusses the location of the city in relation to the sea at some length: the advantages of being able to transport goods from afar by water are weighed against the corrupting influence of visiting traders and sailors, and he concludes that a city should have a harbour, but at a little distance: not within the city itself yet close enough to be controlled and defended.¹⁶ Concerning the city plan itself, Aristotle assumes as a matter of course that it will be based on the familiar "Hippodamian" system of rectangular plots divided by rectilinear streets.¹⁷ Walls are indispensable for safety and desirable for the sake of appearance.¹⁸ The *agora* should be at the centre of the city but conveniently located in relation to the gates, with the temples and government buildings close by.¹⁹ That this is not idle speculation but reflects contemporary town planning practice can be verified by comparing plans of Hellenistic cities with the precepts of Aristotle.

In this respect, a closer look at the map of Nikaia (fig. 8, p. 49) is instructive. Even today, it is possible to discern some basic features of the city's original plan: the rectilinear main streets of the Hippodamian grid meeting each other at right angles in the centre of the city; the four main gates; the lake harbour located close by, but outside the walls; the Aya Sofya Camii at the central intersection. Located by the edge of the lake, with good, level farmland stretching along its shores, Nikaia had "easy access to the sea" – or at least to water transport – "to the land and to its territory". That territory stretched far to the east, probably as far as the Sangarios river (mod. Sakarya). Through it ran the southern of the two main routes from Thrace to Anatolia and the Levant.

In terms of access, Nikomedia, founded half a century later, enjoyed an even more advantageous position at the eastern extremity of the gulf of Izmit, astride the northern route into central Anatolia, with secondary roads branching southward to Nikaia and northward to the shore of the Black Sea. We



Fig. 3. Left: Nikomedian bronze coin of the reign of Commodus. The reverse shows a war galley in the city's harbour, in the background the city's two temples of the imperial cult (cf. p. 47). RGMG 1.3 Nikaia 165 (Gorny & Mosch, Giessener Münzhandlung). Right: Nikomedian bronze coin of Philip the Arab, showing a square-rigged merchant ship. RGMG 1.3 Nikaia 387 (Alexandre de Barros collection).

may take it for granted that the lower city was laid out on a grid plan with the east-west highway as its baseline and some present street alignments may preserve the imprint of the Hippodamian plan.²⁰ It is not known whether the reticular plan extended onto the slopes – perhaps not: according to Libanios, the residential areas stretched up the hillside “like the branches of a cypress”²¹ which rather suggests an organic pattern adapted to the contours of the hills. Libanios also catalogues the city's magnificent buildings destroyed by the earthquake of 358: “colonnades, fountains, squares, libraries, sanctuaries, baths”.²² As at Nikaia, the harbour was located outside the walls, but close to the city. Nikomedia was a major trading port whose ships ranged over the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean.²³ That water transport played a large role in the economy of the city and the self-perception of the Nikomedians is evident from the recurrence of ships and other marine motifs on Nikomedian coins²⁴ (fig. 3) and from the project, proposed in the early second century AD, to cut a canal from lake Sapanca to the sea.²⁵

Turning to Prusa, we find a number of significant differences. There is little evidence for synoikism, indicating that the founder had a free choice of site. The one actually chosen would have met with the approval of Aristotle insofar as it is located on the cool northward-facing slopes of the Bithynian Olympos (modern Ulu Dağ). Remarkably, however, Prusa is some 20 kilometres, a whole day's journey, from the Sea of Marmara; nor does it have “easy access by land and to all parts of its territory” – even today, there are few good roads across the Olympos massif to the southeast of the city. Fortunately, the fertility of the low-lying farmland to the north was sufficient to ensure the city's food supply.

The advantages of Prusa's location were primarily defensive. The acropolis was a rocky plateau c. 600 m across, bounded by steep slopes on three sides and on the fourth by the rising flank of mount Olympos. There are few routes

by which an army can approach by land. The eastern access roads are easily defended where they pass through the hills, while a force landing on the coast would need a day or more to reach the city, giving the defenders sufficient advance warning to deploy their forces in the plain or on the perimeter of the acropolis. (Perhaps Hannibal's own experience had taught him that with the Roman navy in control of the seas, it was better to be located a little distance inland.) The natural defenses of the acropolis were further strengthened by walls (fig. 4).

A further natural advantage of Prusa was its hot springs, situated just over a mile north-west of the acropolis (in the modern suburb of Çekirge). They are mentioned in an inscription of Hadrian's reign²⁶ and by Athenaios (late second century AD), according to whom they were called *basilika*, "royal",²⁷ implying not only that the baths enjoyed some prestige in his time but also that their popularity went back to the period of Bithynian independence. The suburb by the baths was – and is – an attractive residential area on a northward-facing slope with a view of the plain below. A Prusan bronze coin of the late Severan period shows a building flanked by two female figures; if Robert's identification of these as the nymphs of the springs is correct, the edifice in the centre may represent the façade of the bath complex.²⁸

Apart from names and royal epithets, what imprint did the founders leave on their cities? In making Nikomedia his capital, Nikomedes I ensured a steady flow of taxes, gifts and revenues into the city, which along with the



Fig. 4. Though ravaged by time and reconstructed several times (note the column ends and other spolia protruding at the top), the southern wall of Prusa still stands (author's photo).

building programme and ancillary facilities required for a Hellenistic royal residence²⁹ would ensure the future growth and prosperity of the city. Existing settlements such as Astakos already had economic ties to the countryside; after synoikism these links will have continued, now within the economic system of the new city. By the time of Nikomedes' death, Nikomedia was well on its way to becoming a fully fledged Hellenistic city. It furthermore enjoyed the geographical advantage of a location on the main road combined with a saltwater port. For travellers coming from Europe, it would often be more attractive to sail as far as Nikomedia and go on by road, instead of disembarking at the Hellespont or Bosphoros.

Following the Roman annexation, Nikaia became the residence of the governor and provincial capital (*mêtropolis*), a status it retained into the first century AD. To these political assets, it could add the advantages of its lake-side location, its large agricultural hinterland and its function as a staging point on the southern highway.

By contrast, the early years of Prusa were precarious. There is no evidence that major settlements were incorporated into the new city through synoikism, and while Prusa had its own territory, this did not generate income on the same scale as the tax and revenue flows into the capital of a kingdom or province. The founders themselves could not do much to assist it, occupied as they were with the ongoing war against the neighbouring kingdom of Pergamon; in any case, within five years of the city's foundation date, both Hannibal and Prusias were dead.

Kings and emperors

The Hellenistic monarchs of the second and first century BC have been harshly judged by history. To some extent, this is because their biographies were handed down by Roman historians or by historians who, with the perspicacity that comes of hindsight, saw the expansion of Roman power as inevitable. Even their apologists, however, would have to admit that the foreign policy of late Hellenistic kings was often oriented towards short-term goals, making them easy preys for a policy of *divide et impera*.

The clash of interests in Asia Minor was fueled by the conflicting ambitions of three great powers: Macedonia, the Seleucid kingdom, and Rome, and of ambitious medium-sized powers like Pergamon, Rhodes, and at a later date the Pontic kingdom of Mithradates VI. Little Bithynia was too small and weak to be an independent player in this Great Game, but through shifting alliances, her rulers tried to exploit the tensions between her neighbours to their own advantage.

The kingdom of Bithynia was a dynastic monarchy, and violent domestic conflicts were mainly concerned with rival claims to the royal power. Nikomedes I killed his brothers to secure undisputed possession of his throne, and at his death in 255-253 BC, his sons fought over the succession. A century later,

Prusias II was deposed and killed by his son, Nikomedes Epiphanes, who invaded Bithynia with support from the neighbouring king of Pergamon.

Bloody and protracted as such conflicts could be, their impact on the village population and on the artisans and small traders of the cities was mitigated by the fact that in most cases, the aggressor was out to secure or expand a territory for himself. It was not in his interest to alienate his future subjects by excessive brutality, nor to weaken his tax base by slaughtering the population or destroying cities. That this was appreciated by the population, or at least by their leaders, is evident from the behaviour of the Nikomedians when the unpopular Prusias II was besieged in 149 BC. The citizens opened the gates to the soldiers of Nikomedes Epiphanes, in effect declaring Nikomedia "an open city". Their city was spared the horrors of a long siege and possibly (though the sources do not say so) rewarded in other ways for its change of allegiance. Prusias sought refuge in the temple of Zeus, where his son had him killed in defiance of the traditional right of asylum – parricide and sacrilege were, in the last analysis, less dangerous politically than leaving a rival claimant to the throne alive.

By the late second century BC, Rome had emerged as the winner of the Great Game and under the terms of king Attalos' will, the rich kingdom of Pergamon, Bithynia's southern neighbour, was incorporated into the *imperium* as the province of *Asia*. Anti-Roman feeling and the prospect of territorial gains led Nikomedes III of Bithynia into an alliance with Mithradates VI Eupator of Pontos. Their aim was to take Paphlagonia and Cappadocia, then divide these territories between Bithynia and Pontos; however, Roman intervention and inter-allied rivalry frustrated the plan. The death of Nikomedes III in 94 BC led to a struggle for the succession between Nikomedes IV, leader of a pro-Roman faction and his half-brother Sokrates Chrestos, the nominee of Mithradates VI. This vicarious conflict between Rome and Pontos eventually escalated into the First Mithradatic War. The struggle was protracted and though Bithynia was on the side of the victor, the Roman intervention was not without ugly incidents: in 85 BC, the troops at Nikomedia mutinied and killed their commander, L. Valerius Flaccus, then plundered the city.

After the defeat of Mithradates, Nikomedes IV returned from Italy to his kingdom. He was well aware that he owed his throne to the Romans and remained consistently pro-Roman throughout his reign, even following the example of the Pergamene king and bequeathing his kingdom to the Roman people.

A young Roman officer, Julius Caesar, was sent by the governor of Asia on a mission to Bithynia c. 80 BC, "to summon the fleet" (*ad accersendam classem*), according to Suetonius.³⁰ It was probably no diplomatic mission, for which a twenty-year-old would hardly have been chosen; yet he gained access to the royal circles and spent some time at the court of Nikomedes, so much that it gave rise to rumours of a homosexual relationship.³¹ If there is more to the story than that, Caesar may have been on a fact-finding assignment, to sound

opinion at the Bithynian court and prepare Rome for the takeover that might come at any moment if Nikomedes IV should die prematurely. The struggle between Nikomedes and Sokrates had revealed the existence of anti-Roman sentiment among the aristocracy, and there was reason to fear that unpleasant memories of the Roman mutiny and pillage might linger in Nikomedia.

At the death of Nikomedes IV in 74, Mithradates VI once more tried to place a puppet king on the Bithynian throne, and once again, war with Rome was the result. The Pontic king won control of the Bithynian cities and pushed across the border into Mysia, where the important port and city of Kyzikos (at modern Bandirma) withstood a protracted siege. In 73/72 BC, a Roman army under L. Licinius Lucullus forced Mithradates to abandon the siege of Kyzikos and retreat eastwards, while the Lucullan forces re-established Roman control over the cities of western Bithynia.³² During the last stage of the Third Mithradatic War (66-63 BC), Pompey the Great commanded the Roman forces, and after the defeat and suicide of Mithradates, the western part of his kingdom was united with Bithynia. Both territories were incorporated into the empire as the province of *Bithynia et Pontus* and their administrative structure defined in a provincial code, the *lex Pompeia*.

Notes

- 1 Strabon 12.4.7; Stephen of Byzantion, s.v. *Nikaia* (Meineke 474); Leschhorn 1984, 255.
- 2 Marek 1993, 21-23; Højte 2006, 20.
- 3 The most important of these was Astakos, on the southern shore of the gulf, which became part of the territory of the new city of Nikomedia but retained its separate identity: in the second century AD, it is named by Ptolemy of Alexandria (*Geogr.* 5.1) as a separate settlement. For the location of Astakos, see Şahin 1973, 71-73.
- 4 Strabon, 12.4.3; Arrian, *FGrHist* 15.6.29 = Tzetses, *Chil.* 3.963; Stephen, s.v. *Prousa* (Meineke 537)
- 5 For coins bearing the image of the founder Prusias, see *IK* 40, p. 26-28. Only in a few cases, however, is the figure specifically identified as "Prusias, the founder of Prusa", e.g. *RGMG* 1.4 Prusa 48 (Commodus); 116 (Geta).
- 6 Pliny, *NH*, 5.148.
- 7 Strabon 11.14.6.
- 8 Corsten (*IK* 40, p. 22-26) attempts to reconcile the two conflicting traditions by positing *two* foundations, first by a prince *Prus...* in the sixth century BC, then by Prusias I in the second century BC.
- 9 Cf. Dion's apologetic remark, *Or.* 44.9, that Prusa "is not the largest of our cities and has not been settled for the longest time".
- 10 *RGMG* 1.3 Nikaia 54-55; *IK* 9.21-30.
- 11 Kraft 1935, 111; cf. fig. 2.
- 12 *Pol.* 1327a11-1331b23.
- 13 *Pol.* 1330a34.
- 14 *Pol.* 1330b8.

- 15 The view that a southerly or westerly aspect is to be avoided because the city will be too hot, and therefore unhealthy, recurs in the planning advice given by the Roman architect Vitruvius in the first century AD (*De arch.* 1.4.1).
- 16 *Pol.* 1330b32ff
- 17 *Pol.* 1330b32ff
- 18 *Pol.* 1330b32ff
- 19 *Pol.* 1331a30
- 20 Şahin 1973, 18.
- 21 Libanios, *Or.* 61.7.
- 22 Libanios, *Or.* 61.17. While the preceding quotation contains a specific reference to the topography of Nikomedia, the generalized list of public buildings may be inspired by Aristides' *Monody on Smyrna*, *Or.* 18.6.
- 23 Mitchell 1983, 138-139.
- 24 E.g., *RGMG* 1.3 Nikomedia 33 (Domitian); 74-75 (Antoninus Pius); 138 (Commodus); 387 (Philip); also Price and Trell 1977, 213-215. Stephen of Byzantion identifies Nikomedia as an *emporion*, Nikaia as a *polis*.
- 25 Pliny, *Ep.* 10.41. The port installations themselves have long since been destroyed or built over: Lehmann-Hartleben 1923, 167 n. 1.
- 26 For the letter, see Robert 1937, 231.
- 27 *Athen.* 2.43a.
- 28 Robert 1946, 97 and pl. 1.
- 29 Cf. Nielsen 1999, 25-26, 214-215.
- 30 Suetonius, *Divus Julius*, 2.
- 31 Suetonius, *Divus Julius*, 2; 49.
- 32 Appian, *Mithr.* 77.

