

8. The Bithynian Cities under the Later Empire

Antonines and Severans

When the tenth book of Pliny's letters closes shortly after AD 110, so does our window into the urban life of Roman Bithynia. For the remainder of the century, our main sources are inscriptions and scattered references in historical works. The second century has traditionally been associated with peace and stability and even if today's historians do not share Gibbon's unreserved enthusiasm for the "golden age" of the Antonines, it may well have been a time of quiet prosperity for the cities of Bithynia. The paucity of references in the literary sources is in itself an indication that Bithynia was not drawn into the major political and military conflicts of the time.

With the accession of the philhellene Hadrian, the Greek East received more imperial attention than it had enjoyed under Hadrian. The chief beneficiary was Athens, but Hadrian also took an active interest in Bithynia, visiting the region in the aftermath of an earthquake in 120 that caused widespread destruction in Nikomedia and Nikaia. In both cities, reconstruction took place, apparently with imperial support (fig. 30). Hadrian's attention to naval defense and conditions on the Bithynian coast is also attested by the *Periplus* of Arrian, compiled shortly after 130 on the basis of an inspection trip to the ports and bases of the Black Sea.

Little is known of life in Bithynia under the later Antonines, but after the murder of Commodus on the last day of 192, Bithynia once again found itself in the spotlight. Commodus' successor, Pertinax, ruled for three months before he was killed by members of the Praetorian guard in Rome. When the eastern armies learned of Pertinax' death, the imperial legate of Syria, Pescennius Niger, was proclaimed emperor in Antioch and immediately mustered his forces for a showdown with Septimius Severus, the imperial candidate of the Danubian legions.

Most of the cities in the eastern provinces, among them Byzantion and Nikaia, chose to support Pescennius Niger. Nikomedia, however, sided with Septimius Severus. It proved a fortunate choice. Niger gained the upper hand in the early stages of the conflict, but his commander Asellius Aemilianus was killed in the siege of Kyzikos before the end of the year. In early 194, Niger himself led his army against the Severan forces among the hills on the southern shore of Lake Askanios. It was a narrow victory for



Fig. 30. Hadrian's generosity towards the stricken cities of Bithynia was publicized on this imperial sesterce from the mint of Rome. The reverse shows the grateful *tychê* of the city (with a mural crown) kneeling before the emperor, restitutor Nicomediae. RIC 961 (Leu Numismatik AG).

the Severans, but Niger succeeded in bringing his defeated forces to safety within the walls of Nikaia.

Looking back on events from the perspective of a Nikaian but also that of a loyal servant of the Severan dynasty, the preserved version of Cassius Dion's narrative is brief and somewhat circumspect, noting merely that the battle took place between Kios and Nikaia, and that the troops of Niger found refuge "in the city".¹ Herodian is more explicit, and his version of events is worth quoting at length:

When news of Severus' victory spread, its immediate effect was to cause an outbreak of civil strife and factional politics (*stasis kai diaphoros*) in the cities of all the eastern provinces, not really because of partisanship for or against one of the warring emperors so much as jealous inter-city rivalry and because of the slaughter and destruction of their compatriots. This continual inter-city struggle and the desire to ruin a rival who seems to have grown too powerful is a long-standing weakness of the Greeks and sapped the strength of Greece. But as their organization grew feebler and were mutually destructive, they fell victims to Macedonian domination and Roman enslavement. This same disease of jealous envy has been transmitted to the cities that have prospered up to the present day. Straight after the battle of Kyzikos the city of Nikomedia in Bithynia went over to Severus and sent envoys to him, welcoming his army and offering their full co-operation. The people of Nikaia by contrast, because of their rivalry with Nikomedia, joined the other side by opening their gates to Niger's army and taking in any fugitives that came their way as well as the garrison that Niger sent for Bithynia. The

two cities were like army camps and provided the bases from which forces clashed.²

Though scholars are generally sceptic of Herodian's value as a historical source, his narrative of the conflict, including its morale, has been accepted and retold by modern scholars such as Robert (1977), Merkelbach (1987) and Marek (2003).³ Precisely because of its moral nature, however, it should be approached with some caution. Herodian is not retelling the story of Nikaia and Nikomedia merely for its own sake, but to illustrate the nature of the "Greek malady" and its consequences: their jealousy of other cities leads the Greeks to *stasis* and subjection at the hands of others. (Later in his narrative of the civil war, he quotes the parallel examples of Laodikeia and Antioch, Tyre and Berytos to illustrate the same point.⁴) The theme itself – *homonoia* versus *stasis* – is not particularly original, and we have met it more than once in the orations of Dion.

Herodian himself was a teenager at the time of the battle, and while we do not know what sources he had at his disposal, they did not include any first-hand account of the deliberations taking place within the walls of Nikaia. The historian has reconstructed the motives of the protagonists *ex eventu* and in the light of his own historical theory about the all-pervading nature of the "Greek malady".

Leaving the moral and theoretical aspects aside and concentrating on the chronology of events, a somewhat different picture emerges. According to Herodian's account, the sequence was as follows. 1. Severus defeats the forces of Niger at Kyzikos; 2. the news of Severus' victory leads to conflict and *stasis* within "all" the Greek cities; 3. the Nikomedians send ambassadors to Severus; 4. in response, the Nikaians "welcome the army of Niger" which has fled from Kyzikos and is now being reinforced with fresh troops.

On this chronology, the fatal decision of the Nikaians may not have been as unanimous, nor as irrational, as Herodian and his modern followers would have us believe. Since mid-April, there had been three contenders for the imperial throne (the third, Clodius Albinus, was still in Britain and thus of no relevance to the situation in Bithynia). The Severan victory at Kyzikos took place in the second half of 193, possibly as late as December.⁵ Either the Bithynian cities had been sitting on the fence for months, without taking sides in the conflict – which on the face of it seems unlikely – or more probably, and consistent with Herodian's narrative, they had sided with the majority of Asian cities and opted for Pescennius Niger, whose forces controlled most of Asia Minor at a time when Severus' army was still only a distant threat.

As Herodian informs us, the Severan victory at Kyzikos disrupted the complacent attitude "among all the peoples" (i.e. those who had so far supported Niger).⁶ They were divided as to what course to take: some advocated a change of allegiance, others loyalty to Niger. The stakes were high and conflicts sometimes erupted into violence and *stasis*.⁷

Still according to Herodian, “immediately after (*euthys meta*) the events of Kyzikos” the Nikomedians decided to throw in their lot with Severus, “welcoming his army” and promising to furnish everything he required.⁸ Such demonstrative goodwill towards Severus implies that until this moment, the Nikomedians had *not* been among his supporters. At the same time, Niger’s defeated forces were retreating eastwards from Kyzikos to link up with reinforcements sent up “to guard Bithynia.”

In this situation, the Nikaiaans opted for the side of Pescennius Niger. Their choice is not difficult to understand, and while the traditional rivalry with Nikomedia *may* have played a role, it is irrelevant to any serious analysis of their motives. The Nikaiaans, having been on the side of Niger until then, may have been divided in their counsels (as Herodian tells us that “all” the eastern cities were); but everyone would now be aware that a battle-hardened army complete with siege equipment was encamped on the road from Kyzikos, and that Niger was bringing fresh troops up from the south. In this situation, defection from Niger’s side would be suicidal. The citizens of Nikaia could never hope to defend their five-kilometre perimeter – not the massive walls of the later third century, but the lighter structure erected in the Flavian period and repaired under Hadrian – against a trained force of legionaries with scaling ladders and battering rams. Had the Nikaiaans not opened their city to Niger, he would have taken it.

After the final victory, Cassius Dion tells us in general terms that “Severus rewarded his supporters and punished his opponents” and “exactd four times the amount that any individuals or peoples had given to Niger”;⁹ in that case, Nikaia and its citizens paid dearly for their decision to support Niger. The erasure of the the historical titles of Nikaia – metropolis, *neôkoros*, first city – from the inscription over the eastern gate was presumably part of Severus’ punishment: though he did not strip Nikaia of its leading status – that had been lost for more than a century – he humiliated its citizens by removing the references to Nikaia’s former rank. The names of Trajan and Hadrian (which the Severan dynasty claimed among its ancestors) as well as the founding gods, Dionysos and Herakles, were left untouched.

Nikomedia’s imperial century

A few years earlier, Nikaia had issued a coin with the reverse legend *basileuontos Kommodou ho kosmos eutychei*, “under the rule of Commodus the world is happy”; now it was the turn of Nikomedia to strike an issue announcing that “under the rule of Severus the world is happy”.¹⁰ Since its rebuilding by Hadrian, the city had been calling itself *Hadrianê*, and now the epithet *Severianê* was added in honour of its second benefactor.

In return for its support of Severus at a crucial moment, Nikomedia enjoyed a positive relationship with the new dynasty, symbolically expressed by the establishment of additional imperial cults (Severus, later also Elagabal) and

games in honour of the imperial house. Possibly the temple to Commodus, out of use since 193, was re-used for the cult of Severus.

More surprising at first sight is the generous treatment of Nikaia. Punished in 194 for its support of Niger, it was soon granted the right to hold games in honour of the new emperor (*Seouêreia*) and his sons (*Seouêreia philadelphieia*).¹¹ In the reign of Commodus, Nikaia had established games in honour of the emperor¹² – thus Severus, who from 195 onwards claimed to be the adopted son of Marcus Aurelius and *divi Commodi frater*, was bound by the norms of family loyalty to continue the *Kommodeia* in honour of his dead “brother”.

Sentimental considerations apart, there were good reasons for the close relationship between the Nikomedians and the ruling dynasty. Roman emperors needed to keep an eye on the situation on the Parthian frontier (and another eye on the powerful Syrian army, which had provided more than one pretender for the imperial throne). Where previous emperors had usually gone by sea to and from the East, the Severans showed a preference for the overland route through Anatolia, and Nikomedia offered a convenient staging point and temporary headquarters. In 214/215, Caracalla wintered in Nikomedia and found the city so congenial that he stayed long enough to celebrate his birthday (on April 4) before resuming his journey.¹³ Four years later, Elagabal spent the winter in Nikomedia, allowing time for the snows to clear before continuing overland through the Balkans to Rome.¹⁴

For a provincial city, the presence of an emperor was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it offered the chance to meet the emperor and his chief deputies at close hand, to obtain privileges for the city or imperial appointments for oneself and one’s relatives. On the other hand, by the unwritten laws of hospitality, the city was expected to house and feed their visitors. A difficult and demanding task, especially if the visit was a prolonged one or the emperor was travelling with an army.

In such situations, the city naturally looked to its richest citizens to bear the burden, either alone or jointly. Among the many benefactions performed by the rich Ephesian sophist Flavius Damianos, one of the most generous was to feed the army of Lucius Verus “returning from the Parthian victory”.¹⁵ Within Bithynia itself, an inscription records how a wealthy Nikaian, Fl. Severianus Asklepiodotos, received and “accompanied” Caracalla during the latter’s passage on the way from Nikomedia to Antioch in April 215; three years later, he did the same for Elagabal. In return, he received an imperial priesthood and the right to wear the purple. Caracalla in particular could be a demanding guest, as Cassius Dion writes:

Then there were the provisions that we were required to furnish in great quantities on all occasions, and this without receiving any remuneration and sometimes actually at additional cost to ourselves all of which supplies he either bestowed upon the soldiers

or else peddled out; and there were the gifts which he demanded from the wealthy citizens and from the various communities ... But apart from all these burdens, we were also compelled to build at our own expense all sorts of houses for him whenever he set out from Rome, and costly lodgings in the middle of even the very shortest journeys; yet he not only never lived in them, but in some cases was not destined even to see them. Moreover, we constructed amphitheatres and race-courses wherever he spent the winter or expected to spend it, all without receiving any contribution from him and they were all promptly demolished, the sole reason for their being built in the first place being, apparently, that we might become impoverished.¹⁶

Allowing for some exaggeration on the part of Cassius Dion, the description tallies with the inscription in honour of Flavius Asklepiodotos (fig. 31), who arranged both gladiatorial games and wild beast hunts during Caracalla's visit to Nikaia.¹⁷ If supplies were not forthcoming on a voluntary basis, the emperors might resort to requisitions; Caracalla's freedman Theocritus was notorious for his brutality in this respect:

travelling to and fro for the purpose of securing provisions and then hawking them at retail, and he put many people to death in connexion with this business as well as for other reasons.¹⁸

Cassius Dion, himself a member of the elite, complains that provisions were furnished "without remuneration"; but for the man in the street, it mattered little whether the emperor paid for army provisions or not. Even if he did, the presence of a large army would increase demand for foodstuffs and drive prices beyond the means of average consumers, as when Julian assembled his army at Antioch in the latter half of 362. Despite the efforts of the emperor to bring supplies from outside at his own expense, the presence of the army aggravated an already existing grain shortage, leading to price rises and bread riots in the city.¹⁹ In this respect, a port like Nikomedia – which could be supplied by sea if need arose – was better suited as a staging point for an army than an inland city like Nikaia, and this may explain its rôle as a winter base under the Severans and its subsequent rise to the status of an imperial residence.

Once the facilities for accommodating the emperor and the army had been established, they could be re-used on later occasions. According to the hostile account of Cassius Dion, amphitheatres and circuses erected for Caracalla's visits "were all promptly demolished", but this was evidently not always the case. Nikomedia possessed a large bath complex, later known as the "Antonine baths". It was probably here that the sophist Libanios – then at the height of his popularity – gave lectures in the 340s, for lack of a larger auditorium in



Fig. 31. The biography of Flavius Severianus Asklepiodotos, a rich notable of Nikaia in the early third century, records how he “accompanied” Caracalla during the latter’s visits to Nikaia. When Caracalla was murdered and suffered *memoria damnata*, the emperor’s name was erased from the inscription. Iznik Museum (author’s photo).

the city;²⁰ shortly afterwards, the baths were destroyed in the earthquake of 358.²¹ Two hundred years later, Prokopios records Justinian’s restoration of the Antonine baths in Nikomedia, which “because of their immense size” no one had expected to see rebuilt.²² A structure of this size, requiring some time to plan and build, would hardly be erected merely for a winter sojourn. Had he lived, Caracalla presumably intended to return to Nikomedia and make it his residence from time to time, and he may have aimed to match the *Thermae Antonini* at Rome, begun under his father in 206 and nearing completion by 214. No parts of the Antonine baths remain standing in Nikomedia, but their Roman homonym gives an idea of the size and grandeur that may have been intended. As for their location, it was clearly in the lower part of the city,²³ probably somewhere between the citadel and the *agora*.

Of other structures built under the Severans, little is known. We may take it for granted that Nikomedia had an amphitheatre, at least one theatre and a circus. If the emperor intended to stay in the city for longer periods, we may also take it that Nikomedia possessed a palace. From the evidence of coin images and titles, we know that by the reign of Elabagal, the city was *tris neôkoros*, home to no less than three imperial temples (fig. 7).²⁴

For most of the third century, emperors were preoccupied with events elsewhere and visits to Nikomedia intermittent,²⁵ but with the accession of

Diokletian in 284, the city became a permanent imperial residence. Under the Tetrarchy, it was one of the four imperial capitals. The continuous presence of the senior *Augustus*, the highest-ranking of the four tetrarchs, naturally stimulated urban development which was spurred on by the monumental ambitions of the emperor himself. The rhetor Lactantius, who came to Nikomedia at the end of the third century and observed events at first hand, describes the building activities of Diokletian:

In addition, his unlimited desire to build led to requisitions of artisans, artists, wagons and everything required for a building project throughout the provinces. Basilicas here, a circus there, a mint or arms factory; here a house for his wife, there one for his daughter. A great part of the town was torn down straight away ... Thus he raged without pause in his eagerness to make Nikomedia the equal of Rome.²⁶

The requisitions and taxes of which Lactantius complains may well have been resented, but there will have been a more positive side to Diokletian's activities: the immense building site created jobs, stimulated the local economy and attracted immigrants to the region. By the early fourth century, Nikomedia was the fifth largest city of the Empire.²⁷ There is no doubt that by the end of Diokletian's reign, Nikomedia was a magnificent city; both Ammianus and Libanios, who had known it before its destruction by earthquake in 358, are vociferous in their laments. It is indeed a sad fact that seismic activity has obliterated almost every vestige of the city that Diokletian strove to make "the equal of Rome". For an impression of Nikomedia in its glory, one must go to other residences of the Tetrarchs. In the western capital of Trier, the visitor can still get an impression of the sheer size of a late imperial city, while the retirement palace of Diokletian at Split gives some idea of the residence he built in Nikomedia.

Following the abdication of Diokletian in 305, three other emperors made Nikomedia their residence: Maximinus Daia (305-313), Licinius (313-324) and Constantine the Great (324-325). In 312, the presbyter Lukianos was brought to Nikomedia from Antioch to be tried before Maximinus, who had him executed.²⁸ The following year, Maximinus was defeated by Licinius, who entered Nikomedia in triumph and made it the capital of his eastern part of the empire for more than a decade. Relations between Licinius and his western colleague Constantine were strained, and in 324, the conflict came to a head; Licinius was defeated, forced to abdicate and exiled to Thessaloniki.

In the autumn of the same year, Constantine the Great entered Nikomedia for the first time. He remained in Nikomedia over the winter, travelled to Nikaia for the ecumenical council in May-June 325 and returned to Nikomedia to celebrate his *vicennalia* – a year early – at the end of July. By that time, however, Constantine had already chosen Byzantion as the site for the

new city that was to bear his name. When the summer drew to a close and Constantine departed for the west, Nikomedia's time as an imperial capital came to an end.

Change and crisis in third century Bithynia

Traditionally, ancient historians have tended to view the third century as a period of violence and disorder, a distressing contrast to the golden years of the adoptive emperors. Recent scholarship has revised this view; not every change that took place during the third century was a change for the worse, and some of the period's long-term problems had their roots in the second century. Furthermore, individual perceptions of events and trends will have been very different, depending on where one lived and to what social class one belonged.

The senatorial class suffered most, as in the course of the century, its traditional monopoly on leading political and administrative positions was steadily eroded. The accession of the equestrian Macrinus in 217 revealed that it was now possible for non-senators to reach the throne; the reforms of Gallienus at the mid-century excluded senators from military commands, the traditional way to glory and personal prestige. By the late third century, the senate saw itself reduced to the governing council of a city that was in theory still the imperial capital but rarely visited by the emperor.

A basic problem of the empire was the difficulty of raising sufficient funds to pay the army. Since cutbacks in army pay were politically impossible, few financial policy options remained open. The simplest and most effective was to debase the coinage. Coins were called in, melted down and recoined to a lighter weight standard or with a higher proportion of base metal. In the short term, this boosted the state's spending power; in the longer term, it led to inflation. Inflation meant rising cash prices for primary products, benefiting small farmers and urban landowners with large rural properties, who found it easier to pay taxes and debts in cash. Conversely, artisans and urban dwellers relying on the market for their food supplies suffered; so did urban capital-owners and moneylenders.

The cities were among the losers. Over the centuries, they had built up funds and endowments to cover specific items of urban expenditure (e.g., the oil fund of Prusa). Some of this capital will have been invested in land, but much would be in the form of cash lent out to citizens at interest. As primary prices rose, the interest no longer sufficed to cover the cost of oil, grain or other items. As before, cities looked to their richest citizens to contribute or undertake liturgies; thus *archai* developed into mixed liturgies, mixed liturgies into full ones, and the demand for wealthy and civic-spirited citizens grew at the same time that economic conditions favoured a flight of capital to the countryside. A further problem was that as the value of the imperial "silver" coinage declined, so did that of the local bronze coinage, to the point where

the real metal value of the bronze coins was nearly equal to their nominal value. The local mints, which had been a source of urban revenue for centuries, became uneconomical and were closed down.

The situation was not improved by the absence of effective central leadership. The fall of Macrinus led to the reinstatement of the Severan dynasty, first under Elagabal, then Alexander, who held the throne until he was murdered in 235. A semblance of stability returned under Valerian and Gallienus (253-268) and after the accession of Diokletian in 284, the imperial power reasserted itself throughout the empire. By this time, the senate had ceased to play any role in provincial administration and all territories (including Italy itself) were governed by imperial appointees. Under the terms of Diokletian's reorganisation, the empire was governed by four emperors (the tetrarchs), each with his own residential city and "imperial" administration. The provinces were subdivided and grouped under a new administrative unit, the *dioikesis* (see below p. 160).

While the emperors of the third century were struggling to pay their armies, suppress internal rebellions and defend the eastern borders, new problems appeared on the northern horizon of Bithynia. A group of Germanic tribes collectively known as Goths had broken up from their homelands in present-day Poland and moved southwards into the Ukraine and the eastern Balkans. In 255, Gothic raiders travelled down the eastern shore of the Black Sea and attacked Trapezunt; the following year, a larger force crossed the Thracian Bosporos and marched along the Marmaran shore, raiding as they went along.²⁹ Among the cities that suffered were Chalkedon, Nikomedia, Nikaia and Prusa, along with Apameia and Kios. Zosimos, writing c. AD 500 but basing himself on the work of earlier historians, relates how the Goths

... took Chalkedon without opposition, and got possession of an abundance of money, arms, and provisions. From thence they marched to Nikomedia, a great city, famous for its wealth. Though, hearing of their approach, its citizens had escaped with all the possessions they could carry with them, the barbarians were astonished at the amount of valuables they found there. [...] They plundered Nikaia, Kios, Apameia, and Prusa in the same manner. Then they proceeded towards Kyzikos, but the Rhyndakos was so swollen by the heavy rains that they could not cross it and had to return the way they came. On their way back, they set fire to Nikomedia and Nikaia.³⁰

An army led by the senior emperor, Valerian, marched northwards through Cappadocia to intercept the Gothic raiders. The military resources of the Empire were overstretched and before reaching Bithynia, Valerian turned back to deal with a Persian attack on the eastern frontier where, four years later, he was captured. It was the first time that a Roman emperor had fallen into

enemy hands. The shock, combined with lack of confidence in Valerian's son and co-emperor Gallienus, led the eastern armies to acclaim Macrianus and Quietus as emperors. Their rule lasted for slightly over a year. Macrianus moved westward into the Balkans, where he was defeated by the forces of Gallienus; when the news became known, Quietus took refuge in Syrian Emesa, where he was killed. By the end of 261, Gallienus had re-established the rule of his dynasty in Roman Asia Minor. In 268 he was murdered and in 269, his successor Claudius won a victory over the Goths in the central Balkans and henceforth styled himself *Gothicus maximus*. Two years later, Aurelian took the decision to evacuate Dacia; this created a buffer zone for Gothic expansion and settlement. It was to be over a century before the "Gothic problem" again became a serious threat.

To judge from the account of Zosimos, the Gothic raiders of the mid-third century were looking for quick plunder; they had neither the technology nor the time required to undertake protracted sieges, instead they targeted undefended or weakly fortified cities whose leading inhabitants, as in the case of Nikomedia, chose to flee rather than attempt to defend their walls. In response to the Gothic raids, Bithynian cities were refortified. Some walls were erected in haste and using whatever came to hand, as in Prusias ad Hypium, others bear the mark of systematic, large-scale planning, as in Nikaia, where the 5-kilometre circuit constructed under the Flavians and repaired under Hadrian was once more rebuilt, this time on a much more massive scale (fig. 32).



Fig. 32. Despite later reconstructions and repair work, the still standing third century walls of Nikaia give a good impression of the defences of a late Roman city (author's photo).



Fig. 33. The Flavian south gate of Nikaia was reconstructed on the same pattern, though not to the same scale or quality, as the east and north gates (author's photo).

The Flavian/Hadrianic perimeter had been designed for ostentation rather than defense. Its gates were embellished with statues in niches to either side of the archway and perhaps over the gate as well.³¹ As part of the refortification project, towers were added at the gates. The new walls were much higher than their predecessors. At the north and east gates, a new superstructure was added over the gate itself to accommodate a portcullis that could be lowered through a slot cut through the vault of the arched gateway and into the side walls of the gate (figs. 15-17).³² The south and west gates were rebuilt on the same general model, though not to the same architectural standard, as the Flavian gates (fig. 33), re-using blocks from the older gates, and later provided with building inscriptions in honour of the emperor Claudius Gothicus – who, on this basis, has been credited as the initiator of the third-century walls.

A coin issue of Gallienus, however, bears a reverse image (fig. 34a) showing the walls of Nikaia with statues in place on either side of the gates. The provincial coins of Gallienus are notoriously difficult to date, but the abbreviated imperial formula on the obverse was used on Nikaian issues from 256 onwards.³³ Coins of Valerian,³⁴ Macrianus (fig. 34b) and Quietus³⁵ bear a reverse image showing the gates without flanking statues, but with a cross-bar and a vertical hanger in the gateway arch, presumably representing the lower edge of the raised portcullis.

It appears that as a response to the Gothic threat, the city was refortified



Fig. 34. Left: Nikaian coin of Gallienus (AD 253-268) showing the new walls of Nikaia, with large towers flanking the gates. Two statues to the right and left of the archway. Similar to RGMG 1.3 Nikaia 846 (Numismatik Lanz, Munich). Right: Nikaian coin from the brief reign of Macrianus (AD 260-261) showing a similar bird's eye view of Nikaia. The niches flanking the gate are now empty and a portcullis is suspended in the arch of the gate. SNG Aulock 733, similar to RGMG 1.3 Nikaia 867 (Classical Numismatic Group).

from 257 onwards. At first, the walls were raised and towers added. Later, the north and east gates were modified and fitted with a portcullis each. This work had been completed before the capture of Valerian by the Persians in June 260. There was no shortage of funds for the project; as Weiser notes, despite the devastations of 256, Nikaia was able to hold athletic games in 260.³⁶ Work on the south and west gates dragged on, however, since both carried building inscriptions in honour of Claudius Gothicus (268-270).

Alone of the four gates, the western or "sea" gate had not been moved when the walls were extended in the first century AD, and part of the Hellenistic structure may have been standing. The south gate, on the other hand, had been built as part of the first-century extension. For whatever reason, not only the west gate but also the south gate were completely rebuilt, though spoils from the Flavian gate were used to construct the new south gate, which was fitted with a portcullis similar to that of the east and north gates. We may take it that the west gate was constructed in a similar manner. Subsequently, repairs and modifications were required from time to time, to deal with damage due to enemy attacks or earthquakes; they were still taking place as late as the thirteenth century.³⁷

Reorganisation, Christianity and a new imperial capital

Having seized power in 284, Diokletian undertook a sweeping reform of the empire's government structure. Four emperors were to rule jointly over an empire divided into large units known as dioceses, each of which was again subdivided into provinces. The number of provinces was more than doubled, each province being correspondingly smaller. The system of joint government by four emperors was soon abandoned by the successors who had been entrusted with maintaining it, but the structure of dioceses and province remained, and so did the quadripartite division of the empire into four territorial units, each administered by a "praetorian prefect" appointed

by the emperor, but drawn from the senatorial class. The city remained the basic unit of administration, and to counter the tendency of urban elites to shirk their – increasingly onerous – administrative duties, membership of the *boulê* was made compulsory and hereditary.

By the time he left Nikomedia in 325, Constantine had already laid plans for his new imperial capital at Byzantion on the Bosporos, and in May of 330 the new city, Constantinople, was officially dedicated. While Nikomedia remained the seat of the *vicarius* of the *dioecesis Pontica* as well as the capital of the much-reduced *provincia Bithynia*, this was no compensation for the loss of an imperial residence.³⁸ Over the preceding forty years, the spending and consumption generated by the emperor, his extensive entourage and ambitious building projects had acted as a powerful stimulus to economic activity within the city, and many urban projects and tasks that in other municipalities were paid for by liturgists or out of public funds had no doubt been financed by the *fiscus*. Now the city coffers had to provide for the maintenance of the monumental baths and other public buildings erected by the third-century emperors.

Of course, the emperor was not far away – Constantinople was an easy journey from Nikomedia, by sea or by land. But this geographical advantage was shared with the other cities of Bithynia, not least Nikaia. As mentioned earlier, two important highways ran from Bithynia into central Anatolia. With its position near the western end of the northern route, the port of Nikomedia had provided a convenient landfall for traders, administrators and emperors coming from Rome. Going to take up his duties as governor, this was the route taken by Pliny the younger. But from the new capital on the Bosporos, it was equally convenient to cross the Sea of Marmara to Drepanon (mod. Altinova, east of Yalova) and go on by road across the hills to Nikaia, then by the southern route into Anatolia. To facilitate travel on this route, Justinian later built a new bridge over a seasonal watercourse west of Nikaia (fig. 35). The town of Drepanon itself prospered thanks to an association with Lukianos, the martyr of 312, and a somewhat more dubious claim to be the birthplace of Constantine's mother, Helena.³⁹

In the fourth century, Nikaia scored further points at the expense of its rival, hosting the ecumenical council convened by Constantine in 325; then under Valens and Valentinian once again achieving the rank of honorary *metropolis*,⁴⁰ almost (but not quite) on a par with Nikomedia. It is in itself symptomatic that the name of Nikaia became a household word across the Christian world for its association with the "Nicene creed" of 325. Imperial support for Christianity after 312 shifted the balance of political power and social influence in the Bithynian cities. The status of the bouletic elite had been eroded and a liturgy was no longer an honour to be sought, but a burden to be avoided. The church assumed new euergetic roles for itself, and its influence in the cities rose to rival that of the secular authorities, or sometimes exceed it; especially in cases where churchmen managed to combine high



Fig. 35. Prokopios writes that “To the west of [Nikaia] and very close to it ... a bridge had been built by the men of earlier times, which, as time went on, was quite unable to withstand the impact of the stream. ... But the Emperor Justinian had another bridge built there” (Buildings, 5.3). Justinian’s bridge is still standing a few kilometres west of Nikaia, though no longer used by traffic (Jesper Majbom Madsen).

ecclesiastical office with political influence, as Basil of Kaisareia and some of his contemporaries.

Even if their economic and social basis had changed, life went on in Bithynia’s cities, and the proximity of the new imperial capital will have functioned as a cultural stimulus. At the mid-century, Nikomedia was still an attractive place to live and work; Libanios counted his five years in Nikomedia from 344 to 349 among the happiest of his life⁴¹ and in the *Monody on Nikomedia*, he describes the magnificent townscape that had been destroyed in the earthquake of 358. (In addition to his own fond recollections, however, Libanios’ *Monody* was clearly inspired by the similar monody on Smyrna by Aelius Aristides in the mid-second century; thus we should be wary of taking every detail of Libanios’ description at face value).⁴²

The historian Ammianus Marcellinus graphically described the horrors of the earthquake of 358 and the great fire that followed; when another quake struck Nikomedia in 362, he dryly notes that the remainder of the city was destroyed, *reliqua Nicomediae collapsa est*.⁴³ From his choice of words it appears that little reconstruction had taken place; the stimulus to economic activity created by the imperial court and its incessant building projects was absent

and in its absence, the city was unable to maintain itself economically, let alone cope with the massive task of rebuilding itself after the earthquake. To make matters worse, at the mid-fourth century the imperial administration had taken direct control of urban finances, which in effect meant confiscating most of the property, revenues, endowments and taxation rights of the individual cities.⁴⁴ From their remaining resources, Nikomedia's shrinking population could not maintain the architectural legacy of its imperial century, and fourth-century emperors had other demands on their attention. All ambitions of restoring the monuments of Nikomedia were abandoned, and the great baths were to lie in ruins for the next two centuries.

Notes

- 1 Cassius Dion 74.4-6.
- 2 Herodian 3.2.7-9, C.R. Whittaker's translation (Loeb).
- 3 Robert 1977, 24 ("par haine l'une de l'autre"); Merkelbach 1987 ("Der nachbarliche Hass überwog jede vernünftige Überlegung"); Marek 2003, 71 ("kindische Sticheleien").
- 4 Herodian 3.3.3.
- 5 Harrer 1920, 160
- 6 Herodian 3.2.7.
- 7 It was not the first time that political conflict had led to *stasis* at Nikaia; Dion's *Or.* 39 implies that this was also the case shortly after AD 100.
- 8 Herodian 3.2.9.
- 9 Cassius Dion 74.8.
- 10 Robert 1977, 31.
- 11 Robert 1977, 30: RGMG 1.3 Nikaia 355-356; 359-360.
- 12 Robert 1977, 21; 32-35. RGMG 1.3 Nikaia 302; 305-306; 310; 316.
- 13 Cassius Dion 77.19; Halfmann 1986, 224.
- 14 Halfmann 1986, 231.
- 15 *IK* 17.3080.
- 16 Cassius Dion 77.9 (translation Earnest Cary).
- 17 *IK* 9.60; see also, p. 103-104.
- 18 Cassius Dion, 77.21 (translation Earnest Cary).
- 19 Ammianus 22.12-14; Matthews 1989, 409-411.
- 20 Libanios, *Autobiography*, 55.
- 21 Libanios, *Or.* 61.
- 22 Prokopios, *Buildings* 5.2-3. To impress by the standards of sixth-century Constantinople, the "Antonine Baths" of Nikomedia was clearly a complex of some size, its construction requiring advance planning. For this reason alone, the baths are more likely to be the work of Caracalla than of the teenage emperor Elagabal who had ascended the throne less than three months previously. From the great baths at Rome, begun by his father c. 206 and nearing completion by 214, Caracalla would have skilled architects and technicians at his disposal.
- 23 As Libanios (*Autobiography*, 55) tells us, the complex included large swimming-baths requiring a water supply; considering the difficulties of the Nikomedians with their aqueduct recorded by Pliny a century earlier (*Ep.* 10.37) they would not be able to bring a water supply in at a high level. We may take it that the

- high-lying parts of the city were supplied by wells or with water carried from fountains in the lower quarters.
- 24 For a possible reconstruction of the temple precinct of Nikomedia, see Bosch 1935, 217.
 - 25 Weiser (1983, 75-76) hypothesizes that Valerian may have visited the province in 256 on the occasion of the Nikaian games, but positive proof is lacking.
 - 26 Lactantius, *De mortibus* 7. The daughter in question is Galeria Valeria, *Augusta* and wife of the emperor Galerius.
 - 27 Libanios, *Or.* 8; Lichtenstein 1903, 8.
 - 28 Eusebios, *HE* 8.13.2; 9.6.3
 - 29 Zosimos, *HN* 1.32-35; Marek 2003, 94.
 - 30 Zosimos, *HN* 1.35.
 - 31 Højte 2005, 36-37
 - 32 As noted by Schneider and Karnapp (1938), the rough character of the stonework at the north and east gates reveals that the slot for the portcullis is a secondary feature, cut when the arch was already in place. It would be interesting to know how the gates were closed before the portcullis was installed; according to Herodian (3.2.9), by the late second century the gates of Nikaia could be closed for defense. The south gate was dismantled and reconstructed in the third century, with a slot for the portcullis. Presumably the west gate, which is not preserved, was rebuilt in a manner similar to the south gate.
 - 33 Bosch 1935, 61; Weiser 1983, 81.
 - 34 Weiser 1983, 89 n. 23 and pl. 27, 24-25.
 - 35 Macrianus (*RGMG* 1.3 Nikaia 867-868); Quietus (*RGMG* 1.3 Nikaia 872-873), also see fig. 34b.
 - 36 Weiser 1983, 88.
 - 37 Schneider & Karnapp 1938, 43.
 - 38 Though the new province of Bithynia was much smaller than the pre-Diokletianic double province of Bithynia et Pontus, this was to some degree compensated by the refocusing of imperial administration on diocesan and provincial capitals rather than individual *poleis*. As argued by J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz (2001, 12; 38-39) this gave the capital cities a significant competitive advantage over their neighbours.
 - 39 *Chr.Pasch.* 527 (Dindorf) for the year AD 327. Two centuries later, Prokopios recorded how Justinian provided Helenopolis – as Drepanon was now called – with an improved water supply, a second bath complex, and “churches and a palace and stoas and lodgings for the magistrates, and in other respects he gave it the appearance of a prosperous city” (*Buildings* 5.2; translated by H.B. Dewing).
 - 40 Foss 1996, 12-13.
 - 41 Libanios, *Autobiography* 51-53.
 - 42 Libanios, *Or.* 61; for Libanios’ emulation of Aristides, *Or.* 18, see Anderson 1993, 321.
 - 43 Ammianus, 17.7.1-8 (earthquake of 358); 22.13.5 (earthquake of 362).
 - 44 Liebeschuetz 2001, 175-178.

