

PHILIPPOI OR PHILIPPOLIS, NICOPOLIS EPIRUS OR NICOPOLIS AD NESTUM

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Abstract. In the Biblical science, including New Testament research, assumptions and hypotheses are often expressed, and great efforts are made to defend opinions that differ from traditionally accepted facts about biblical personalities or events. Such an example are the aspirations of some ambitious Bulgarian scholars to redraw the path of the preaching activity of the apostle Paul on the Balkan Peninsula arguing that he went not to the city of Philippi, but to the city of Philippopolis. The other ancient city that is claimed to be a biblical site is the town of Nicopolis ad Nestum in the middle reaches of the Mesta River in southern Bulgaria. Strange as it may seem, some researchers claim that this is the city where apostle Paul wished to spend the winter months, as he wrote to his disciple Titus (Tit 3:12), and not Nicopolis Epirus. The reasons for the interest in such hypotheses are clear: everyone is seduced by the thought that his place or his country had a glorious but already forgotten history; that only more famous countries and cities are considered to be the centers of events in world history, including Christian history. But history is a memory of truth, not of imaginary events.

Keywords: Philippi, Philippopolis, Nicopolis Epirus, Nicopolis ad Nestum, apostle Paul, province of Macedonia, province of Thrace, the Acts of the Apostles.

In the Biblical science, including New Testament research, assumptions and hypotheses are often expressed, and great efforts are made to defend opinions that differ from traditionally accepted facts about biblical personalities or events. The motives for efforts of this kind could be different, but very often they are related to the desire of certain authors to offer solutions that satisfy their personal ambitions in science (and not just in science). Usually there is a desire to prove something that, according to the authors, will increase the authority of their homeland or their country. But a motive could be not only that, as is the case with the Dr. Heinz Warnecke's study of the site of the Apostle Paul's shipwreck on his way to Rome¹.

¹ Cf. Heinz WARNECKE und Thomas SCHIRRMACHER, *War Paulus wirklich auf Malta?* Neuhausen, 1992. In fact, Dr. Warnecke's theses pitted not so much the scholars among themselves as the inhabitants of Malta against the inhabitants of the Greek island of Kefalonia.

We see such an example in the aspiration of some ambitious Bulgarian scholars to redraw the path of the preaching activity of the apostle Paul on the Balkan Peninsula. Similar attempts have been made with regard as well to other historical figures outside of biblical history.

And now specifically to the examples. In connection with the story of the Acts of the Apostles about the preaching of the apostle Paul in the city of Philippi, Macedonia, some Bulgarian scholars have been seduced by the possibility that he went not to the city of Philippi, but to the city of Philippopolis.²

The reason is that at the time of apostle Paul's visit Philippi was a "small town" inhabited by Roman military colonists - veterans, while Philippopolis was a large city with a developed economic, cultural and religious life, including a synagogue building. The city of Philippopolis is on the banks of the big river Hebros (today called Maritsa), which at that time was navigable.³ Dr. Asen Chilingirov from Berlin in his book "Apostle Paul, Philippi and Philippopolis" and in a number of other related publications tries to refute the traditional perception of the testimony of Acts and the Paul's epistles, and his position gained considerable popularity, especially among non-specialists. Guided by unscientific criteria, many ask themselves: why should we accept that the apostle was in the city of Philippi and not in the city with the similar-sounding name of Philippopolis? In addition, Dr. Chilingirov points to a significant number of scientific literature that he has studied and on whose information he relies. But, of course, he interprets the information in his own way and is definitely biased.

Such a statement is confronted above all with the repeated mention of the name of the city of Philippi outside the story in Acts 16. Here are the examples:

In Acts 20:6 the author notes: "we sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we joined them in Troas" (ἡμεῖς δὲ ἐξέπλευσαμεν μετὰ τὰς ἡμέρας τῶν ἀζύμων ἀπὸ Φιλίππων καὶ ἦλθομεν πρὸς

² One such is the Bulgarian art historian Asen Chilingirov. Since 1965 he has specialized and then worked in (East) Berlin, teaching History of Arts at the University of Leipzig and at Humboldt University. He is known for often supporting the so-called "fringe theories" that differ from those accepted in science in a given field. It is probable that his scientific pursuits were influenced by his passion for the esoteric teachings of the „White Brotherhood” sect in Bulgaria. In Germany he published the books: 1. Assen TSCHILINGIROV, *Die Kunst des christlichen Mittelalters in Bulgarien*. Beck Verlag München, 1979; 2. *Bulgarien. Kulturgeschichte im Prisma. Vom Altertum bis 1878*. Leipzig 1987. In the last three decades he has published in Bulgaria books on the history of the country and the Bulgarian people, which, however, are met very critically by the scientific community. Among his publications is the book that interests us in the concrete case: *Apostle Paul, Philippi and Philippopolis*. Sofia, 2019 (in Bulgarian: Апостол Павел, Филипи и Филипопол. София, 2019).

³ Valkan VALKANOV, *Maritime History of Bulgaria*. Sofia, 2000, p. 73 (in Bulgarian: Вълкан Вълканов. Морска история на България. София, 2000, с. 73).

αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν Τρωάδα ἄχρι ἡμερῶν πέντε). Of course, they started from Neapolis, which served as a port for the important city of Philippi.⁴

At the beginning of the Epistle to the Philippians (Philippians 1:1), the name of the city of Philippi is mentioned: „Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi” (Παῦλος καὶ Τιμόθεος δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ πᾶσιν τοῖς ἀγίοις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Φιλίπποις).

At the end of the same epistle (4:15), the apostle called the local Christians by the name of their city, associating them with the province of Macedonia: „You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia...” (οἴδατε δὲ καὶ ὑμεῖς, Φιλιππηῖοι, ὅτι ἐν ἀρχῇ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, ὅτε ἐξῆλθον ἀπὸ Μακεδονίας...).

The First Epistle to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 2: 2) speaks of what happened to the apostle in the city of Philippi: „but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition” (ἀλλὰ προπαθόντες καὶ ὑβρισθέντες, καθὼς οἴδατε, ἐν Φιλίπποις ἐπαρρησιασάμεθα ἐν τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν λαλήσαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν πολλῶ ἀγῶνι).

Even assuming that an error was made in one of these places and the name Philippi was recorded instead of Philippopolis, it is difficult to accept that in all places the information about the city of Philippi is wrong,⁵ and it must be understood the other city named after the Macedonian ruler Philip II – Philippopolis. On the other hand, if the apostle Paul intended to go to Philippopolis, which is still in the province of Thrace, and not in the province of Macedonia, then from Troas he would easily cross the Hellespont Strait (now the Dardanelles) and travel north first and then northwest to Philippopolis. It was not necessary to sail to the island of Samothrace, from there to the port of Neapolis (now Kavala), and only then to look for a way on the river Hebros to Philippopolis. A separate issue is that sailing against the current of this river was not easy. In some places the depth is small and was sailed mainly by rafts, which were pulled upstream by horses. In any case, the apostolic route drawn by the author of the Acts through the island of Samothrace and Neapolis naturally leads to the city of Philippi.

The history of the apostolic work of St. Paul, as can be seen from the description of his missionary journeys, witnesses that his goals were mainly the larger cities on the Mediterranean coast, in which there were also Jewish synagogues, i.e. Jewish

⁴ St. Ignatius of Antioch also speaks of this in his Epistle to Polycarpus, 8, 1 (IGNATIUS ANTIOCHENUS. *Epistula ad Polycarpon*. PG 5, 728).

⁵ Unserious sound the following words of A. Chilingirov: „At the end of the 4th and during the 5th century all liturgical literature, including the four Gospels, was basically re-edited and supplemented with new texts, as very clumsily and without elementary knowledge of the history and topography of the holy places, stories were written, which have nothing to do with the truth” (*Apostle Paul, Philippi and Philippopolis*, p. 114).

communities. The apostle always sought to preach first among them, as he himself points out in his letter to the Roman Christians: „to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι – Rom. 1:16; 2:10). He did this both because of the Jews' familiarity with the expectation of the Messiah and because of their knowledge of the Holy Scriptures.

It is true, that in Asia Minor the apostle Paul went into the mainland, but because of its geographical proximity to Palestine, there was a Jewish community in every major settlement. Nevertheless, the apostle did not go very deep into the land of the peninsula of Asia Minor. While the problem with Philippopolis is that the city is too far (about 300 km) from the Mediterranean coast, and respectively, from the usual route of the apostle, traveling west or east.

The other ancient city that is claimed to be a biblical site is the town of Nicopolis ad Nestum in the middle reaches of the Mesta River in southern Bulgaria. Strange as it may seem, some researchers claim that this is the city where apostle Paul wished to spend the winter months, as he wrote to his disciple Titus: „When I send Artemas to you, or Tychicus, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there” (Ὅταν πέμψω Ἀρτεμᾶν πρὸς σὲ ἢ Τύχικον, σπούδασον ἔλθειν πρὸς με εἰς Νικόπολιν, ἐκεῖ γὰρ κέκρικα παραχειμάσαι (Tit 3:12)).

A few kilometers from the current Bulgarian town Gotse Delchev can be seen excavated remains of Nicopolis ad Nestum⁶. According to archeological finds, the city existed in the second millennium BC. As a Thracian settlement during the Hellenistic era, it was known by the Greek name Alexandropolis, and was called Nicopolis by Emperor Marcus Ulpius Traianus in 106, when he conquered Dacia and established it as a Roman province. Trajan gives the name Nicopolis („city of victory”) to two cities in Thrace, located along the rivers Ister (Danube) and Nestos (Mesta).⁷ In any case, this did not happen until the beginning of the second century AD. or about half a century after the apostle Paul's supposed wintering in a town called Nicopolis.

⁶ Or Nicopolis ad Mestum, as the name is written in Greek on coins from antiquity (see Holger KOMNICK, *Die Münzprägung von Nicopolis ad Mestum*. Griechisches Münzwerk. Berlin, 2003, pp. 4, 90).

⁷ Named Nicopolis ad Istrum and Nicopolis ad Nestum respectively. See Velizar VELKOV, “Development of Urban Life. Road System.” – In: *History of Bulgaria I*, 1979, p. 307. Dilyana БОТЕВА, “Name and Foundation of Nicopolis on the Mesta River.” – In: *Numismatics, Sphragistics and Epigraphy 3*, Part 2, Sofia, 2007, p. 196 (in Bulgarian: Велизар Велков. «Развитие на градския живот. Пътна система.» – В: История на България I, 1979, с. 307. Диляна Ботева. «Име и основаване на Никополис на р. Места.» – Нумизматика, сфрагистика и епиграфика 3, част 2, София, 2007, с. 196).

Titus 4:2 is the only place in the New Testament where the city of Nicopolis is mentioned. The text of the Epistle to Titus does not specify exactly where this city was. In fact in ancient times there were many cities with recurring names such as Nicopolis, Neapolis, Caesarea, Antioch and others. It is known that Octavian Augustus founded two cities named Nicopolis, both dedicated to his victory at Actium in 31 BC: one in the region of Epirus, on the Ionian Sea coast, not far from the present-day Greek city of Preveza, and the other in Egypt.⁸ Nicopolis of Epirus was founded in 31 BC, and Nicopolis in Egypt – in 24 BC.

Nicopolis in Epirus with its double port was the largest city on the west coast of Greece at that time. Augustus built and organized it as a Greek polis, using the existing settlements around,⁹ and formed a new capital of the province of Epirus. From Nicopolis to Brindisi(um) by sea is about 200 miles, and from there on Via Apia the traveler reaches Rome. As a capital city and a port of contact with Italy and Rome, the city could have been a natural destination for apostle Paul traveling west.

Unlike the Nicopolis Epirus, Nikopolis ad Nestum is still more than 100 km from the sea coast, and the road to it passes through high mountain saddles, because in the valley of the river Mesta the terrain is impassable in places. And perhaps most importantly: from Nicopolis ad Nestum there is no easy access to other large settlements that would be of interest to the missionary Paul. Therefore, it seems pointless to choose such a place for a winter break.

However, these considerations do not prevent some authors from insisting that the apostle remained in Nicopolis ad Nestum during the winter months. They even point out as evidence the hot mineral springs in the vicinity of the city, as well as modern churches and chapels dedicated to apostle Paul.¹⁰

The reasons for the interest in such hypotheses are clear: everyone is seduced by the thought that his place or his country had a glorious but already forgotten history; that only more famous countries and cities are considered to be the centers of events in world history, including Christian history. But history is a memory of truth, not of imaginary events.

⁸ JOSEPHUS FLAVIUS in his work *De bello Iudaico* (4, 659) notes the name of the Egyptian Nicopolis: μέχρι Νικοπόλεως, εἴκοσι δὲ αὕτη διέχει τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας σταδίου. He also mentions the inhabitants of Nicopolis (apparently Nicopolis of Epirus): ἀλλ' Ἀθηναῖοι καὶ Λακεδαιμόνιοι Νικοπολίται τε (Ibidem, 1, 425). See also STRABO, *Geography*, 7.7.5-6; 10.2.2 and more details in DIO CASSIUS, *Roman History*, 50.12.1-8; 51.1.2-3.

⁹ According to DIO CASSIUS (*Roman History*, 51.1.2-3).

¹⁰ This is used as evidence of a possible memory of apostle Paul in the area. See for this hypothesis: Todor SÁBEV, "The Missionary Work of St. Paul the Apostle and His First Disciples on the Balkan Peninsula." – In: *Duhovna kultura*, 7-8 /1967, p. 34 (in Bulgarian: Тодор Събев, «Мисионерското дело на св. апостол Павел и неговите първи ученици на Балканския полуостров.» – В: Духовна култура, 7-8/1967, с. 34).

It is natural that such stories and tales as the mentioned hypotheses about Philippopolis and Nicopolis ad Nestum have a place in world literature, but when we talk about the truth and exactly the truth about important events in the life of the Church, we can not get carried away and trust unprovable fabrications.¹¹

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¹¹ Because very often these are "statements of unproven knowledge and emotions" (Prof. Plamen RADEV, "Let's be careful with the life of St. Hermas." *Vestnik „Plovdivski universitet”*, issue 5-6 / 14.6.2011, pp. 18-19. In Bulgarian: Проф. дпн Пламен Радев, «Да бъдем внимателни с житието на св. ап. Ерм.» Вестник „Пловдивски университет”, бр. 5-6/14.6.2011 г., с. 18-19).

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