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## **The early Byzantine fortifications of Nikopolis in comparative perspective**

The early Byzantine fortifications of Nikopolis are the most imposing remains of the ancient city. They form an irregular rectangle, with straight sides along the south and west and more uneven sides along the north and east<sup>1</sup>. The walls lie entirely within the fortifications erected by Augustus after the Battle of Actium, with the best preserved sections along the south and the west, where they survive to a height of up to ten meters.

The fortifications of Nikopolis are thus among the most important examples of military construction in the southern Balkans. They are accordingly featured in a recent survey of Byzantine military architecture as "the grandest extant piece of Justinianic fortification"<sup>2</sup> and they hold the promise of becoming the standard for comparison in this part of the empire, just as Sergiopolis/Resafa has become in the East<sup>3</sup>. Likewise, the fortifications of Nikopolis must have played a crucial role, not only in the history of the city, but also in the province of Epirus Vetus and southern Greece, since the city was located astride one of the main invasion routes into the south<sup>4</sup>. As is generally known, Nikopolis survived the invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries<sup>5</sup> and even the various Slavic incursions of the early Byzantine period until at least the ninth century<sup>6</sup>. Certainly, the walls of the city played a fundamental role in this survival and in the critical symbiosis between Greeks and invaders which must have followed.

Nevertheless, the fortifications of Nikopolis have received almost no detailed examination, and few conclusions can yet be made about their chronology, form, and history. As an indication of this neglect, until recently the only plans available were those published by Leake and Filadelfefs many years ago<sup>7</sup>.

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1. See A. Filadelfefs: ΠΑΕ (1926); F. Schober, RE 17, 514.

2. A. W. Lawrence, "A Skeletal History of Byzantine Fortifications" BSA 78 (1983) 193 - 94.

3. W. Karnapp, Die Stadtmauer von Resafa in Syrien (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Denkmäler antiker Architektur 11, Berlin 1976.

4. Lawrence, "A Skeletal History", 193.

5. E. K. Chrysos, Συμβολή στην Ιστορία της Ἠπείρου: Ἠπειρωτικά Χρονικά 23 (1981) 9-11.

6. P. Soustal, Nikopolis und Kephallenia. TIB 3 (Vienna 1983) 213 - 14.

7. William Leake, Travels in Northern Greece I, London 1835, endmap; Filadelfefs: ΠΑΕ (1926).

Obviously, much preliminary work needs to be done before a synthetic study of the early Byzantine fortifications of Nikopolis will be possible: this must naturally involve a full instrument and photographic survey, necessary both as a basis for research and as a record of evidence which is otherwise endangered. In addition, selected stratigraphic excavation is a desirable part of a full research plan. This may seem surprising for a structure which is nearly everywhere preserved above ground level, but small-scale, stratigraphic excavation is the only means to secure clear evidence of chronology, and quite startling results have sometimes resulted from such a program of excavation, requiring substantial revision of otherwise - accepted building sequences. Good examples of this are the two fortifications of the Korinthia discussed below: both of these were previously attributed to Justinian, and the Hexamilion even has a Justinianic building inscription, but excavation has shown that both were built in the early fifth century<sup>8</sup>.

In addition, excavation will facilitate understanding of the later history of the walls and the attendant structures which must have been built up against, or even within, them during periods of disuse. Such a campaign of small-scale excavation should also involve investigation of limited areas outside the walls, to allow comparisons between conditions on both sides of the fortification. Until such a program of research is conducted at Nikopolis it is obviously premature to draw firm conclusions about the characteristics and chronology of the early Byzantine fortifications. Nevertheless, some few tentative observations may be suggested here, in the hope of stimulating further investigation.

Such observations may be based partly on comparison with the better-known fortification systems in the southern Balkan region, especially in Greece. Comparisons can, of course, be potentially misleading since there is no clearly - established typology of early Byzantine fortifications<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, what evidence we have suggests little relationship between building technique and date<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, few synthetic studies of early Byzantine fortification have so far been attempted, and comparison between well-documented and little-known fortifications in related areas will at least have the advantage of helping us define questions and posit preliminary hypotheses for later investigation.

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8. See discussion and bibliography below. Excavation has played an important role at sites such as Carthage (C.M. Wells, "Carthage: The Late Roman Defenses", in W.S. Hanson and L.J.D. Keppie, eds., *Roman Frontier Studies* 1979 [BAR Int. Ser. 71.3, Oxford 1980] 999-1004) and Resafa (Karnapp, *Stadtmauer von Resafa*).

9. Lawrence, "Skeletal History", 171 - 227, makes an attempt at such an analysis, but his chronology is far too questionable to allow useful conclusions.

10. See Stephen Johnson, *Late Roman Fortifications*, London 1983, 31 - 54.



Many early Byzantine fortifications are known from Greece, but only a few of these have been fully investigated. Among the latter, the present study will make use of fortifications at Athens and Sparta<sup>11</sup>, but more especially the early Byzantine wall at Corinth<sup>12</sup> and the Hexamilion, the six-mile fortification across the Isthmus, which has most recently been investigated by Isthmia Excavations (UCLA) under the direction of Paul A. Clement<sup>13</sup>.

In terms of form and function, it is clear that the walls at Nikopolis fall generally into a type that is seen, for example, at Athens, Sparta, and Corinth. These cities were all defended by powerful and expansive walls in the classical period. In the third century and later, when threat of barbarian invasion again materialized, new walls were built, defending areas that were always considerably smaller than those which their classical predecessors enclosed<sup>14</sup>. In most cases the classical walls of these cities were still partly preserved in the early Byzantine period (indeed, many sections are still visible today) so their ruins could have been used at least for the foundations of the new fortifications. Nevertheless, the new walls were generally constructed along a different course, involving considerable additional expenditure in material and manpower. A compelling reason must have lain behind this decision, and some have seen in this evidence of a decrease in population and, accordingly, a construction of the urban area; this now seems most unlikely, however, and many cities may even have grown in size during this period<sup>15</sup>. Far more likely as a cause is the military necessity of defending the cities with a relatively small force. Thus, early Byzantine walls seem frequently to have been built around the core of the city, leaving some of the urban area outside and providing a place of refuge for those who lived in the immediate vicinity.

As we have seen, the early Byzantine walls of Nikopolis enclosed only a fraction of the Augustan city. Nevertheless, the new fortification apparently made use of the Augustan walls along its north and east sides, suggesting differences between the situation in Nikopolis and that in southern Greece and raising larger

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11. See *T.E. Gregory*, "The Fortified Cities of Late Roman Greece," *Archaeology* 39 (1982) 14 - 21; and "Fortification and Urban Design in Early Byzantine Greece," in *City, Town and Countryside in the Early Byzantine Era*, ed. *Robert L. Hohlfelder* (East European Monographs 120, New York 1982) 43-64.

12. *T.E. Gregory*, "The Late Roman Wall at Corinth", *Hesperia* 48 (1979) 264-80.

13. See his reports in *Arch. Delt.* for 1968 - 1973.

14. See the discussion in *Gregory*, "Fortification and Urban Design".

15. See *J.C. Russell*, *Late Ancient and Medieval Populations*. (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, n.s. 48.3, Philadelphia 1958, and the discussion in *T.E. Gregory*, *Vox Populi*, Columbus, Ohio 1979, 18-21. On the number of soldiers required to defend an early Byzantine city wall, see the interesting, although questionable calculations of David van Zanten in *George M.A. Hanfmann and Jane C. Walsbaum*, *A Survey of Sardis and the Major Monuments outside the City Wall*, Cambridge, Mass. 1975, 42.

questions of planning and function: given the necessity to shorten the line of the walls (for whatever reason), why was that particular area chosen to defend?

In part that answer may be peculiar to the situation at Nikopolis and to the date at which it was fortified. It has previously been noted that the Augustan walls may not have been intended for defensive purposes since they apparently had towers only along the eastern side<sup>16</sup>. When it became necessary to re-fortify the city, the northeastern corner of the Augustan settlement may have been chosen to take advantage of the arguably stronger walls in this vicinity. In addition, this area is marginally higher than the surrounding territory, making it slightly easier to defend. Also, by the time Nikopolis was fortified the military engineers may simply have changed their attitude toward the re-use of earlier fortifications.

Comparison with other fortified cities suggests further considerations. Thus, at Korinth the early Byzantine wall enclosed the center of the ancient city, including the Roman Forum, which housed not only the civic offices, but also those of the province of Achaia. At Athens, by contrast, the third century walls excluded the ancient Agora, suggesting that the governmental offices of Athens may already have moved, perhaps to the area of the Roman Agora, which was then enclosed by the new wall. A similar situation seems to have developed in Sparta<sup>17</sup>.

Our knowledge of the topography of Nikopolis is presently too sketchy to allow firm conclusions, but it might be argued that the important buildings of Nikopolis were already located in the area enclosed by the wall at the time of its construction. The sequence might, of course, have worked the other way around, with construction of the wall providing the security which led to construction of the buildings, but the general pattern of development elsewhere in Greece suggests the former sequence. In Athens there is also some evidence that the area enclosed by the third - century wall may have suffered less destruction in the Herulian invasion of 267 than that which was left outside the new defenses. It is possible that a similar situation existed in Nikopolis after the Vandal attack of 474/5 and that the northeast corner of the Augustan city was less seriously affected than other areas. Only further investigation of the city, both inside and outside the Byzantine walls will settle this question with certainty. In addition, one should certainly look for long, important Roman buildings under the foundations of the long, straight western and southern sides of the early Byzantine walls.

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16. *Chrysos*, Συμβολή 25, note 3, citing the work of Theofilos Theofylaktos.

17. See Gregory, "Fortification and Urban Design," 46 - 50.



The walls of Nikopolis have traditionally been dated to the reign of Justinian, largely on the basis of Procopius' statement (*de aed.* 4.1.37) that the emperor ἀνεγείκασατο δὲ Νικόπολιν. This statement, however, is far from clear, and the reliability of Procopius has recently been seriously challenged<sup>18</sup>. At various sites throughout the empire it can now be shown that Procopius exaggerated the extent and the importance of Justinian's building activity; the purpose of the *de aedificiis* was, after all, panegyric and Procopius seems regularly to have attributed constructions to Justinian that were the work of his predecessors.

The circumstantial historical evidence relating to the building of the walls is potentially more useful than that of Procopius. Thus, in 474/75 Nikopolis was apparently sacked by the Vandals under Geiseric, and this has led Chrysos to suggest that the walls of the city must have been built after that date<sup>19</sup>. In 551 the city was again plundered, this time by the Ostrogoths of Totila (Procopius, *Wars* 8.22.31) and this might suggest that the walls were built between that time and the date of the *de aedificiis* (probably between 554 and 560)<sup>20</sup>. This argument is, however, far from conclusive, especially given the ambiguity of the text of Procopius as to the nature of Totila's attack on the city<sup>21</sup>.

We are left, therefore, with a basically stylistic analysis, and in this we find that the walls of Nikopolis exhibit many important similarities as well as significant differences from other, better - known fortifications in the region. The walls at Nikopolis were constructed in a simple and easily understandable style, with a core of rubble and mortar, faced, inside and out with alternating courses of brick and roughly-cut stone, all of this built upon a foundation of ashlar blocks, which are sometimes constructed in several courses. The jambs of doorways and the sides of piers are also frequently made partially of ashlar. The towers are of various designs: rectangular, horseshoe-shaped, and round, the latter used especially on the corners<sup>22</sup>. Opposed stairways run upward on either side of most of the towers, supported by blind arches and by a central arch which allowed passage into the lowest level of the interior of the tower.

18. See the important study of Brian Croke and James Crow, "Procopius and Dara," JRS 83 (1983) 143 - 59; also W. Liebeschuetz, "The Defenses of Syria in the sixth Century," in D. Haupt and H.G. Horn, eds., Studien zu den Militärgrenzen, Roms II, Köln 1977, 487 - 99. It is surprising that none of this literature has cited the evidence of the Hexamilion. See P.A. Clement, "The Date of the Hexamilion," Essays in Memory of Basil Laourdas, Thessaloniki 1975, 159 - 64.

19. Chrysos, Συμβολή 53.

20. See B. Rubin: RE 23.1 (1957) 572 - 87.

21. A crucial question is the reading of διαφερόντως. Procopius has just said that the Ostrogoths plundered the territory around Dodona and he is, at that point, more interested in displaying his knowledge of the mythological foundation of Anchialos than he is about supplying detailed historical information.

22. Pringle, The Defense of Byzantine Africa 157, 435, notes 31 - 32.

The use of levelling courses of brick is rare in southern Greece during the early Byzantine period, since faces of ashlar were preferred. But alternating courses of brick and stone are, of course, characteristic of fortifications elsewhere in the Aegean, most notably at Thessaloniki and Constantinople<sup>23</sup>. The brick courses at Nikopolis run all the way through the thickness of the wall and they are normally *ca* 0.47 m. high, consisting of five bricks set in a red mortar, a technique identical to that used in Constantinople in the early fifth century.

At Isthmia the faces of the Hexamilion in its original phase (early fifth century) are of ashlar, but brick courses seem to have been used in a series of repairs or rebuildings. One of these is in the large Bastion at the North Tower of the Northeast Gate, which can be securely dated to the middle of the sixth century<sup>24</sup>.

Along the south side the fortifications at Nikopolis the stairways reach a level that is *ca*. 7 m. above the ground and upon that level is built a series of blind arches *ca*. 3 m. high, which supported the fighting - platform at the top of the wall. The arches are *ca*. 1.80 m. wide and they rise above piers that are constructed generally in the same technique used in the lower part of the wall. A curtain wall. *ca*. 0.63 m. thick, closes off the arches on the exterior.

This arcade may have been part of the original construction of the wall; there is no clearly visible horizontal line between the two sections. The piers, however, are footed directly on top of one of the brick levelling courses and they are not tied into the masonry below, certainly a dangerous omission in any kind of construction, let alone one designed to withstand pressure from without. The wall here is also remarkably thin. What is more, the arches run the full width of the wall, so that there cannot have been a walkway at the level of their bottom after the arches were built, and, as we have seen, a thin curtain wall closed the arches so this level cannot have been used for defense.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the stairways on either side of the towers run up to the level of the bottom of the piers, which is an incomprehensible design once the arcade had been built. It is possible, of course, that the stairways ran on straight to the top of the arcade; there would have been just room enough for them to do so.

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23. On Constantinople, see *B. Meyer - Plath and A.M. Schneider*, *Die Landmauer von Konstantinopel*, Vol. 2 (Denkmäler antiker Architektur 8, Berlin 1943); for Thessaloniki there is no good general survey, but see *M. Vickers*, "The Late Roman Walls of Thessalonica," *Transactions of the 8th International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies* (Cardiff/Birmingham 1974) 249 - 55; *G. Gounaris*, *Tà teíχη τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης*, Θεσσαλονίκη 1976.

24. *P. A. Clement*: *Arch. Delt.* 25 (1970) *Chron.* 164 - 65.



But no evidence survives to show how the upper part of such a stairway would have been supported and it is reasonable to suggest that the arcade may have been a later addition, built to add height to this section of the wall. There is no evidence that other parts of the wall had similar arcades, although most are not well enough preserved to tell one way or another. Along the west side, however, there is evidence that no arcade existed and that the surviving top of the stairways is at the level of the original fighting-platform.

According to Procopius, Justinian increased the heights of several fortifications by the addition of vaulted galleries, for example at Dara (*de aed.* 2.1.15-16) and at Theodosiopolis (*de aed.* 3.6.9). There is some question about whether Justinian actually carried out this plan at Dara, where recent investigation has failed to find any trace of an arcade<sup>25</sup>, but such a practice must have been a common feature of Justinian's plans for construction and reconstruction. A more complex scheme of arcading is seen, for example, at Resafa.

The West Gate is undoubtedly the most interesting part of the preserved fortifications at Nikopolis. This is not the place to describe the complex fully, and it is enough to mention a few characteristics. The single gateway was flanked by horseshoe-shaped towers, and the northern of these had at least four levels, the uppermost of which was supported by a masonry dome. The lowest of the fighting-levels had narrowed archery slits, while the upper interior level had splayed openings for artillery. The gateway was closed by a door, fastened by a large bolt, and immediately behind it was a portcullis.

One of the most striking things about the West Gate is the size of the towers. These are roughly 9.4 m. wide, and they project *ca.* 7.7 m. from the face of the wall. They thus closely resemble the size of the towers on the large wall at Constantinople (*ca.* 9.3. m. wide by *ca.* 10.7 m. [see Fig. 1]) and the larger towers at Resafa (9.1. to 11.6. m. wide with a projection of 10.4 m.). They are, however, notably larger than the single excavated tower at Korinth (*ca.* 5.8 m. on a side), and those on the Hexamilon, which are normally 5.6 m. wide; the North Tower on the Northeast Gate, for example, is *ca.* 6.6 m. wide and it projects *ca.* 6.1 m. (hatched area of Fig. 1). This shows, first, that the fortifications of Nikopolis are more in the class of Constantinople and Resafa than that of the Korinthia. This provides no chronological assistance, however, since the Land Walls of Constantinople were constructed in the early fifth century while Resafa was fortified (presumably) in the sixth. As we have seen, part of the Northeast Gate at Isthmia was rebuilt about the

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25. Croke and Crow, "Procopius and Dara", 155, cf. note 68.

middle on the sixth century and a large Bastion was added to the North Tower. It is not clear how high this Bastion was and it may never have been completed, but the Bastion was *ca.* 9.5 by 10.8 m. This approximates the standard used in the towers of Nikopolis, Constantinople, and Resafa (Fig. 1). This suggests, for one thing, that a single Byzantine standard for the construction of large towers must have been in use for at least a century and a half.

The Bastion at Isthmia was constructed by adding masonry to the north and east sides of the formerly half-round tower. This technique is described by Procopius (*de aed.* 2.1.19) for Justinian's activity at Dara<sup>26</sup>. Nearly the same treatment was accorded to a triangular tower on the early Byzantine wall at Corinth, which was made square by the addition of masonry to the face of the tower. This rebuilding can be dated to the reign of Justinian<sup>27</sup>.

The Bastion at Isthmia may be an example of a special kind of tower that seems characteristic of Justinianic military planning. At Constantina, Procopius (*de aed.* 2.5.8) refers to a construction called a *πυργοκάστελλον*, a word whose precise meaning is difficult to determine<sup>28</sup>. It is probably similar to the towers at Toperus (*de aed.* 4.11.16) and Theodosiopolis (3.5.1.) and those on the Long Wall in Thrace (4.9.10-11), where the emperor made *πύργον ἑκάστον φρούριον ἐχυρόν*.

According to Procopius, one of the key features of such towers was that they could not be entered from ground level, but only from the parapet-walk. With the possible exception of those on the West Gate, the towers at Nikopolis seem of a very different type since they all apparently allowed entrance from the interior of the fortifications (although access to the upper floors may only have been from the fighting-platform).

From the text of Procopius and the remains at Isthmia we may identify certain features as characteristic of the Justinianic program of military construction, at least in this part of the empire: large, potentially independent towers, high curtain walls, frequently supported by an arcade, and a penchant for covering smaller towers with an exterior, apparently always rectangular, face<sup>29</sup>. Not all of these

26. Pringle, *The Defense of Byzantine Africa* 155, 170.

27. Gregory, "The Late Roman Wall at Corinth", 265-66; 272, where I expressed doubt about a Justinianic date for the reconstruction; in view of Procopius' evidence for Justinianic technique of tower conversion, however, a sixth-century date now seems to me likely, although this does contradict the impression of *de aed.* 4.2.27 that Justinian fortified the Isthmus rather than rebuild the walls of the cities of the Peloponnese.

28. Pringle (155) thinks that the distinction was between two sizes of towers, as at Resafa.

29. For an earlier attempt to characterize Justinianic construction technique, see Lloyd W. Daly, "Echinos and Justinian's Fortifications in Greece," *AJA* 46 (1942) 500-08, and my comments in "The Late Roman Wall at



characteristics are found on every Justinianic construction or reconstruction, but the generalization nevertheless seems valid.

It is significant, then that only one of these characteristics can be found in the walls at Nikopolis — the arcade — and this may have been a later addition. These observations may be sheer coincidence, and only further detailed examination of the remains will allow certainty here, but it is tempting to suggest that the early Byzantine walls of Nikopolis were not built by Justinian, but by one of his predecessors, either Zeno or, more probably, Anastasius<sup>30</sup>. Justinian, then, would have been responsible only for the reconstruction of the fortifications, a task which he performed at many other sites. This is in keeping with the text of Procopius, who says merely that Justinian "renewed" or "refounded" the city. That certainly suggests some action on the emperor's part, but Procopius is hardly given to understatement and had Justinian really built the walls from the ground up, one would expect much fuller treatment in the *De aedificiis*.

Be this as it may, the fortifications at Nikopolis are of first - rate importance, for the historian and the student of Byzantine military strategy and planning. They were certainly erected well after the fortifications in the Korinthia and they display considerable sophistication and a provision for artillery that suggest a date either in the late fifth or early sixth century. More detailed study, however, is necessary before the full history and significance of the walls can be known<sup>31</sup>.

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Corinth," 267, n. 3.

30. Fortifications at Athens, Korinth, and on the Isthmus were all constructed in the aftermath of catastrophic barbarian invasions. See *P.A. Clement*, "Alaric and the Fortifications of Greece," *Ancient Macedonia*, Second International Symposium (Thessaloniki 1977) 135 - 37. This would seem to make Zeno a prime candidate, but he was probably too preoccupied with other concerns, and Anastasius may be a better choice.

31. *Charles Peirce* made the drawing that appears as Fig. 1. I wish also to thank him for his assistance, advice, and enthusiasm.

