

NICOPOLIS

Nicopolis is mentioned only one time in the New Testament. Writing to the evangelist Titus, one of his protégés, the apostle Paul stated, “As soon as I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, because I have decided to winter there” (Tit. 3:12). The occasion for these instructions was the period between Paul’s two Roman confinements. He had already spent two years in Rome under house arrest, had appeared before Caesar, and had been released (see Acts 28:16, 30; Phil. 1:7, 25, 26; 2:24; Philem. 22). After being acquitted, Paul made a “fourth missionary journey” about A.D. 63-65. While the exact route he took is uncertain, plausible reconstructions have been made. (For example, see David L. Roper, *Acts 15—28, Truth for Today Commentary* [Searcy, AR: Resource Publications, 2001], 513-18, 537.) One of the sites Paul visited was the island of Crete, where he left Titus to “straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town” (Tit. 1:5). From there, Paul wanted Titus to meet him at Nicopolis, where he planned to spend the winter.

Which Nicopolis did Paul have in mind? Nicopolis is a compound name, combining the Greek words for “victory” (*nikē*) and “city” (*polis*) to mean “city of victory.” It was used to identify places where key military victories had been won, so many sites in the ancient world wore that name. For example, there was a Nicopolis in Lesser Armenia or Pontus (Strabo *Geography* 12.3.28), one in Bythia (Pliny *Natural History* 5.43), one in Cilicia (Strabo *Geography* 14.5.19), and one in Egypt (Josephus *Wars* 4.11.5 [659]). However, those cities were all located beyond Paul’s known travels during this period. The most likely location for the city mentioned by Paul is in Greece.

One ancient writer described the Greek Nicopolis as being “a city of Achaia” (Tacitus *Annals* 2.53), whereas another specifically placed it in the region of Epirus (Ptolemy *Geography* 3.13.1-2). The city was situated on the western coast of Greece, across the Ionian Sea from Italy. It had been built on the northern promontory of the Gulf of Ambracia, also referred to as “the Gulf of Actium” or “the Gulf of Arta.” Nicopolis was founded in 29 B.C. by Octavian, who later became known as “Augustus Caesar.” It commemorated his recent naval victory over Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. (Suetonius *Lives of the Caesars: Augustus* 18). The city was built near the site where Octavian had set up his camp. Mark Antony’s camp had been directly opposite, on the southern side of the gulf below Actium.

Nicopolis was established as a Roman colony. Whole communities in western Greece were evacuated in order to populate the new city (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 5.23.3). Due to its strategic location, Nicopolis served as a communication link unifying the western and the eastern portions of the Roman Empire. The city became an important center of trade, which revitalized the region economically. In earlier times, the Epirus region had been devastated by the attacks of various Roman generals (Strabo *Geography* 7.7.3, 9).

Augustus was not alone in his construction of Nicopolis. In order to gain favor with the rising emperor, Herod the Great made large donations toward building the city, especially its public buildings (Josephus *Antiquities* 16.5.3 [147]). Beyond the city's construction, Augustus also "established games to be celebrated there every five years" (Suetonius *Lives of the Caesars: Augustus* 18). To facilitate the Actian Games, Augustus had a gymnasium, a stadium, a theater, and a hippodrome built at Nicopolis. Moreover, he enlarged "an old temple of Apollo" and "ornamented with naval trophies the spot on which he had pitched his camp, and consecrated it to Neptune and Mars" (Suetonius *Lives of the Caesars: Augustus* 18). He wanted to honor Neptune (god of the sea = Poseidon) and Mars (god of war = Ares) for the naval victory, attributing to them the sudden storm that had facilitated his defeat of Antony. These naval trophies were decorated with bronze battering rams from the prows of Antony's ships, which had been captured during the battle.

What should be understood from the instructions relating to Nicopolis in Titus 3:12?

(1) The choice of Nicopolis may indicate Paul's desire to spread the gospel to an important Roman colony in the western part of Greece for the first time. It appears that "the apostle to the Gentiles" had earlier evangelized farther west than the Greek cities named in the book of Acts. After all, when he wrote to the Romans from Corinth, he explained, "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ" (Rom. 15:19). Illyricum was northwest of Macedonia; perhaps Paul had reached Illyricum's borders when he went throughout the regions of Macedonia near the end of his third missionary journey (Acts 20:1, 2). Nevertheless, Nicopolis was located in western Greece—the Epirus region, south of Illyricum—and was perhaps new soil in which the gospel could be planted. If the church already existed in Nicopolis, then Paul would have taken the opportunity to teach and strengthen the Christians living there.

(2) Paul's plan to spend the winter months at Nicopolis likely points to the fact that traveling by sea was extremely dangerous at that time of year (Acts 27:9-44). However, when spring arrived, he would be prepared to sail from that coastal city to his next destination.

(3) Assuming Paul made it to Nicopolis, it is at least possible that he was arrested there and taken to Rome for his second confinement, which eventually ended in his death (see 2 Tim. 4:6-8). Interestingly, in A.D. 66—not long after Paul planned to winter at Nicopolis—the Roman emperor Nero participated in the Actian Games there as a part of his Greek games tour (see Suetonius *Lives of the Caesars: Nero* 23). Coins were issued celebrating Nero's visit, and he renamed the city *Neronikopolis*.

The ruins of the buildings and monuments mentioned above, as well as many others, can be seen at the archaeological site of Nicopolis today, which is about four miles north of modern Preveza. For more information, virtual reconstructions, and photographs, see the free online book entitled *An Archaeological Guide to Nicopolis* written by Konstantinos Zachos (www.academia.edu/22578684/An_archaeological_guide_to_Nicopolis). Artifacts from the ancient city are on display at the Archaeological Museum of Nicopolis.