

SAMOTHRACE

Samothrace (known as Samothraki today) is a rugged Greek island eleven miles long in the northeastern Aegean Sea. The name *Samothrakē* could be a combination of the words *samos* (“height”) and *Thrakē* (“Thrace”), meaning “height of Thrace” or “Thracian high place.” The highest elevation on the island is Mount Fengari (Mount Saos), which rises to 5,285 feet (a mile high). Homer pictured the Greek god Poseidon sitting on the heights of Samothrace and looking over the city of Troy during the Trojan War (*Iliad* 13.9-14). Apparently, Thracians first settled the island of Samothrace in ancient times; and Greek colonists arrived much later, about the seventh or sixth century B.C. Another explanation of the name *Samothrakē* is that the Greek settlers came from the island of Samos and mixed with the earlier Thracian population (see Pausanias *Description of Greece* 7.4.3; Strabo *Geography* 10.2.17).

Samothrace is mentioned once in the Bible, when Paul’s missionary team was traveling from Troas to Philippi on the second missionary journey in response to the Macedonian call (c. A.D. 49). Luke wrote, “From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi . . .” (Acts 16:11, 12a). The fact that they sailed “straight” indicates the shortest route to their destination, a trip which they made in one day. The high mountain on Samothrace served as an unmistakable landmark for sailors. Moreover, the island was a convenient place for them to anchor their ships at night, avoiding the risk of dangerous sailing in the dark.

The text does not say whether Paul and his companions went ashore that evening. Regardless, he could not have spent much (if any) time preaching there, since they sailed on to Neapolis “the next day.” Nevertheless, the ruins of an ancient Christian basilica at Paleopolis on the northwest shore of Samothrace commemorate his visit there. In 2007, the Shrine (Seat) of the Apostle Paul was built nearby for the same purpose. Paul may have returned to Samothrace on a voyage back to Troas near the end of his third missionary journey (Acts 20:6).

The Sanctuary of the Great Gods is a short distance from the harbor at Paleopolis. Paul could have visited there, if he desired to do so. It was the most prominent religious center of the northern Aegean region. Mystery rites at the sanctuary took place at night. Inscriptions indicate that the rites were open to all—regardless of nationality, gender, age, or social status. Participants in the rites could progress through two stages—a basic initiation (*myesis*) and an advanced degree (*epopteia*). Many divinities were worshiped there, including Demeter, Hermes, the Cabiri, Hades, Persephone, Venus, and Pothos (McRay, 279-80). Fant and Reddish provided a schematic of the sanctuary, along with a brief description of its buildings (Clyde E. Fant and Mitchell G. Reddish, *A Guide to Biblical Sites in Greece and Turkey* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003], 128-32). More recent 3D digitized reconstructions of the site by Emory University are available on YouTube.



Winged Victory of Samothrace (Louvre, Paris)

Winged Victory (or Nike) of Samothrace is a famous monument discovered at the Sanctuary of the Great Gods. It was found in 1863 by Charles Champoiseau, a French diplomat and amateur archaeologist. At that time, the island was under Ottoman control. The statue of Nike was taken to the Louvre in Paris, where it was put on display in 1866. Later, the base of the statue was transported to Paris and reassembled. Today, the Greeks would like to have the whole monument back.

Winged Victory was likely a votive offering intended to thank the gods for victory in a naval battle. The monument's presence at the Sanctuary of the Great Gods informed everyone about the victory, whether ally or enemy. Since no inscription was discovered with the monument, it is difficult to date with precision. Many naval battles took place in the Aegean

Sea during the third and second centuries B.C. The monument, which is eighteen feet high, is believed to have been the work of Rhodian sculptors. One common theory is that it was offered by the people of Rhodes after an important naval victory in the early second century B.C.

Nike, the goddess of victory, is portrayed as completing her flight, with her wings still spread out backwards. The head and arms of the statue are missing; it is believed that her right arm was raised up in victory. Based on similar images on tetradrachma coins from the time of the Macedonian Demetrius Poliorcetes (306-283 B.C.), it was once thought that Nike was blowing a trumpet in victory; but newer evidence argues against that idea. She is dressed in a tunic (*chitōn*), and her lower body is partially covered by a thick mantle (*himation*). Although the mantle is falling off of her, the force of the wind keeps it pressed against her right leg. She is landing on the prow of a war ship, which serves as the statue's base.