

# Aspects of Worship in Nicomedia of the Fourth Century AD

Zoe Tsiami  
Orthodox Academy of Crete, Greece  
zotsiami@uth.gr

## Abstract

The Bithynian city, Nicomedia (known today as Izmit or Iznikmid), composes a rich ground for historical research, as it consisted of the main city for several distinguished people, like the emperor Diocletian, who declared the city as the capital of his empire. The residency of Diocletian in Nicomedia brought over the years a variety of changes that affected the profile of the city, both politically and socially.

The view and the prosperity of Nicomedia as far as we know constructed an ideal city model, but as it comes to religious subjects, the situation was different. Nicomedia was chosen as a residence from several Roman and Byzantine emperors and seemed to assimilate the political and social reforms that they settled. However, as it comes to religion and worship practices, the situation was more complicated. Religion becomes a magnet of infighting, changes, and reforms between the people of Nicomedia.

This paper discusses these parameters above, which were at their outbreak during the 4th century AD. Together, we shall see the traditions of the Roman influence that were settled in Nicomedia, as well as the changes and conflicts that Christianity brought over the centuries.

**Keywords:** *Nicomedia, Diocletian, Roman empire*

## 1. Introduction

While Nicomedia's aspect and well-being can be compared to an ideal city model in some ways, the religious and worship aspects of the city were quite different. Nicomedia was chosen regularly as a city residence from several Roman emperors and seemed to embrace the political and social changes that each emperor incorporated in the city. In the case of religion, however, the situation was rather convoluted. Religious conflicts and changes made religion a focal point.

The 4th-century worship was affected on a great level by Constantine the Great when he claimed the Roman Empire and made Christianity an official religion in it. Christianity becomes a worship subject, but also a conflict pole simultaneously. But let's try to compose a previous image of the city, regarding its religious life. Originally, the city was built around Greek and Roman idols. Dionysus and Hercules were credited with building the city, and Zeus was tasked with protecting it. As time went on, the idolatry continued. A paganistic Nicomedia can be seen, for example, in the second century AD<sup>1</sup>. In Nicomedia, the pagan element was generally accepted, but it did not bring universal harmony. During the same period (2nd century), the first Christians began to appear in Bithynia. A fear that this new religion would threaten pagan worship led to persecutions and arrests in the province. Christianity was seen as blasphemous towards the Roman Empire and society at the time, as well as a presence associated with witchcraft; such practices threatened the rule of the Roman Empire<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless,

the official reason for the persecution of the Christians was not one from the above, but their refusal to sacrifice to their Roman emperor<sup>3</sup>.

As time goes by, we reach the 4th century where we meet fundamental changes regarding the worship subjects of the city. The facts of the 4th century played a key role in the decline of paganism in the East, resulting in the rise of Christianity relatively quickly. One of the most enlightening written sources regarding the religious evolution of Nicomedia are the written works of Eusebius of Caesaria; he describes graphically the gathering of the early church and its organization, as well as the way of the establishment of Christianity in the eastern provinces. Furthermore, he describes the troubles and the obstacles regarding its establishment, as well as the social difficulties and the persecutions that its embracers faced, and the gradual organization of this new religion from its bishops and archbishops. Constantine the Great seems to have been responsible for the final success of Christianity according to Eusebius. According to Eusebius, the imperial contribution was largely practical and materialistic; Constantine built churches and was concerned about the spread of Christianity in the above provinces, as well as its dissemination to the West. It appears that the Emperor gave a great deal of attention to the eastern part of the empire, initiating important reforms based on Christian beliefs. The emperor showed favour to Christian residents of his empire by showing them off socially while ensuring big economic support to local churches<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The similar national religious faith predicts that in the eastern regions, there was not a single religious pattern (something similar to present-day Christian doctrines), but there were variations in the religious figures or the way they were worshipped.

<sup>2</sup> Pliny the Younger, Letter 96 (10.96).

<sup>3</sup> Pliny mentions the process of arrest and the subsequent course of action of the Christians regarding the refusal or acceptance of a sacrifice in honour of the emperor in his 96th (Book 10) Letter to Trajan.

<sup>4</sup> Eusebius mentions all the above actions mainly in his *Life of Constantine the Great*, a work in praise of the emperor's person and inextricably linked to the Christian faith. Eusebius, however, writes his text from a subjective perspective, wishing to impose or justify the emperor's strategy and violent actions. For more,

Nicomedia was probably the most well-known city to enjoy these favours, but it was also where the emperor grew up, lived, and received both school and military education.

Nevertheless, Constantine's plan to develop his political employment in Nicomedia and throughout his empire did not seem to be entirely fulfilled. The presence of the pagans was still bold. Nicomedia had still impressive temples and statues dedicated to the ancient gods and sacrificial altars. Their presence is described accurately by Libanius, in a relatively discriminated way; The orator in his orations seems to hide the Christian presence in Nicomedia, while he points out its pagan one, which was still bold during the fourth century. The same thought, yet in a more improved way, also followed Ammianus Marcellinus, by describing pagan temples in the city. Despite the pagan orators' efforts to conceal Christianity in Nicomedia (and Bithynia), it seems to be spread among the residents of the city<sup>5</sup>.

Although Christianity is rising and spreading in Nicomedia, it is not in the way that its supporters desire. There are conflicts between the Christian bishops in Nicomedia regarding church organization and their relationship. In the first half of the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa wrote a letter to the Christian priests of Nicomedia and convinced them to destroy every element of conflict and organizing issue and to focus on their concord, as well as the proper function of the church<sup>6</sup>. Thus, we can admit that gathering Christianity and defining its role was a difficult task, which caused serious disagreements.

During the same time, dangers of religious distortions appeared, which would deviate from the original apostolic preaches of Christianity. One of these dangers was the preaching of Arius, a Christian priest in Alexandria of Egypt, during the late 3rd and 4th centuries. As a result, he started to preach some controversial views about Christianity and its triadic substance, embracing some new ideas and beliefs around the figure of Christ. In that way, he placed the kindlings that would set on fire Christianity and would raise a new heretical movement in the East, called "Arianism"<sup>7</sup>. This movement soon reached Nicomedia. Before the mid-fourth century, the heresy of Arius seemed to have many embraces, and, between them, the one of the bishop of Nicomedia Eusebius. The embracing of Arianism from Eusebius was very clear. In his preaching, he showed support for Arianism, which caused reactions among Nicomedian Christians and as a result, he was accused of being one of the main causes of Arianism's rise in the city. This issue drew reactions, which led to the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, which condemned the heresy. The ideas and the orations of Eusebius of Nicomedia mentions also Athanasius of Alexandria, who did not hesitate to openly condemn him and the heresy, by characterizing it and him as opponents of Christianity<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Conclusion

The spread of Christianity in Nicomedia confused the way of life and the traditional values of the city. It was not only a step toward the coming of a radical religious change in the next centuries; it also suffered from several conflicts, not only between pagans and Christians but also between Christians exclusively. The pagan worship, of course, had not yet disappeared in the fourth century -

as we heard earlier. Its presence was still bold and more acceptable than Christianity. Nevertheless, the emergence of the latter religion generated more reactions in the city, approaching the interest and insertion of local authorities. Nicomedia experienced a transitional period in regard to social worship in the fourth century: the beginning of the rise of Christianity and the downfall of paganism.

**Résumé - Aspects du culte à Nicomédie du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle après JC :** La ville bithynienne, Nicomédie (connue aujourd'hui sous le nom d'Izmit), constitue un riche terrain pour la recherche historique, car elle était la ville principale de plusieurs personnalités distinguées, comme l'empereur Dioclétien, qui déclara la ville capitale de son empire. La résidence de Dioclétien à Nicomédie a apporté au fil des années une série de changements qui ont affecté le profil de la ville, tant politiquement que socialement.

La vue et la prospérité de Nicomédie, à notre connaissance, ont construit un modèle de ville idéal, mais en ce qui concerne les sujets religieux, la situation était différente. Nicomédie a été choisie comme résidence par plusieurs empereurs romains et byzantins et a semblé assimiler les réformes politiques et sociales qu'ils ont mises en place. Cependant, en ce qui concerne les pratiques religieuses et culturelles, la situation était plus compliquée. La religion devient un aimant de luttes intestines, de changements et de réformes entre les habitants de Nicomédie.

Cet article discute de ces paramètres ci-dessus, qui étaient à leur apparition au 4<sup>ème</sup> siècle après JC. Ensemble, nous verrons les traditions de l'influence romaine qui se sont installées à Nicomédie, ainsi que les changements et les conflits apportés par le christianisme au fil des siècles.

**Mots-clés :** Nicomédie, Dioclétien, Empire romain

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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<sup>5</sup>The information of the writers Ammianus Marcellinus and Livanus which preceded the chapter on pagan Roman temples refers (if we judge from the dating of the lives of the two writers) to the middle of the fourth century, so we are again led to the conclusion that Christianity was still largely competing with Roman religious ideals.

<sup>6</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *Τοίς έν Νικομηδεία Πρεσβυτέροις*.

<sup>7</sup>A valuable source of information on the heresy of Arius, in particular, are the writings of Athanasius the Great, who wrote four extensive speeches purely on the issue and fighting for Arianism [See. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Κατά Άρειανών* (Orations A'-Δ')].

<sup>8</sup>Athanasius of Alexandria, *Περί της έν Νικαία Συνόδου*, 35.4.14.

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