



Summary :

Nikonion was a significant Greek city in the Black Sea, in the region of modern Ukraine, built on the eastern coast of the Dniester River. The wealth of the archaeological material found in the area indicates, among others, increased commercial activity and close relations with the Greek mainland. The city maintained an almost constant presence between the second half of the 6th c. BC and the 3rd c. AD.

Other Names

Nikoneon, Nikonia

Geographical Location

Ukraine

Historical Region

Black Sea

1. Foundation of the City – Location

Ancient [Greek colony](#) in modern Ukraine, built on the eastern coast of the Dniester River (ancient Tyras), near [Odessa](#),¹ at latitude of 26° 10' N and longitude of 30° 25' E. [Strabo](#) says that the city was within a distance of 140 stadia (nearly 26 km) from the coast.² Other names attributed by the sources are Nikoneon and Nikonia.³ The metropolis of the city remains unknown: tradition wants it that Nikonion was a colony of [Miletus](#).⁴ However, [Histros](#) is preferred by modern bibliography.⁵

Nikonion was founded in the second half of the 6th c. BC and was in direct connection with the more important city of [Tyras](#), on the western edge of the Dniester Liman. They were the only Greek colonies on the estuary of the Dniester in that period⁶ and the inhabitants of the area were called Tyritai.⁷ Nikonion is identified with the archaeological site located near the village of Roksolanskoye gorodischche, on the left bank, and very close to the estuary of the Tyras River. According to archaeological evidence, the city was founded in a previously uninhabited area.

2. Archaic and Early Classical Period

The history of the city can only roughly be reconstructed. The city controlled one of the key trade routes of the region; slaves, metals, furs and leather were that merchants got from Tyras and Nikonion and resold them.⁸

Towards the mid-5th c. BC the city was under the rule of the Scythian king Scyllis, as concluded from contemporary coins.⁹ At a later stage it probably joined the Athenian League, since it was included in the lists of contributors for the League in 425/424 BC.¹⁰ In the 4th c. BC the city was independent. Several small towns on the outskirts of Nikonion, such as Nadlimanskoe III and IV, or even Nikolaevska, should be considered possessions annexed to the city between the Archaic and the Late Classical period.¹¹

Nikonion was destroyed in 331 BC by Zopyrion, [Alexander the Great's](#) general.¹² In the early 3rd c. BC the city was refounded by Tyras, with the active participation and support of Histros, as evidenced by coins.¹³ It was also reported by Arrian in the 2nd century as a "hamlet".¹⁴ According to the archaeological evidence, the city was abandoned in the 3rd century for unknown reasons.

3. Excavations - Finds

Systematic excavations on the archaeological site were first carried out in 1962 by the University of Odessa. Extensive research started during the 1990s and is still underway by Polish and Ukrainian archaeologists.



3.1. Architectural Remains

The wall that surrounded the city, after its northwestern section was excavated and studied, is dated to 475-450 BC.¹⁵ There were rock-cut houses, following the local tradition: the large ones had two rooms, although single-room houses were more common. Each house covered an area between 11 and 40 square metres. A building consisting of two rooms has been described as a place of worship.¹⁶

3.2. Cults – Small scale Sculpture

The pantheon of the city can be partly reconstructed thanks to the epigraphic and iconographic evidence. [Demeter](#) and the Daughter, [Dionysus](#), [Aphrodite](#), [Cybele](#), [Artemis](#), [Zeus](#) and the Heroes were all worshipped. The cult of Zeus was the most important of all; several graffiti of the 5th and 4th c. BC mention the god and they probably came from a temple. In one case, Zeus is reported as king. Although this cult is also found in [Olbia](#), it was probably unknown in the region.¹⁷ Among the figurines found are types of Aphrodite and Artemis, enthroned deities, satyrs and female heads.

3.3. Pottery

There were numerous pottery imports, mainly in the early and the late 6th c. BC. The most important finds are the commercial [amphoras](#) from the Aegean islands ([Chios](#), [Samos](#), [Lesbos](#), Thasos), the ornamented pottery from Asia Minor and, in the 5th and 4th c. BC, the Attic [red-figure](#) and black-glazed vessels.

Particular mention should be made of two kraters of the third quarter of the 5th c. BC, nowadays kept at the Museum of Odessa. The first is a bell krater and depicts the Dionysian thiasos (group) with a satyr playing the *aulos* and leading Dionysus and a Maenad who holds two torches. The second is a calyx krater depicting the unique scene of [Apollo](#) and Dionysus at Delphi.¹⁸ Other Attic imports include a red-figure [pelike](#) depicting [komasts](#), a [skyphos](#) with an athlete and a trainer, askoi of the early 4th c. BC decorated with animals, a [lekkythos](#) with floral and geometric ornaments on a white background as well as black-glazed [kantharoi](#) and [kylikes](#).¹⁹

4. Classical and Hellenistic periods

The Archaic and the Early Classical city was succeeded by a classical phase, which came to end with the destruction of Nikonion in 331 BC by Zopyrion. The site was abandoned, possibly in the early 3rd c. BC, after an unknown destruction, while the inhabitants escaped to the powerful neighboring city of Tyras. However, when Autocles and an unidentified citizen of Tyras helped them, they returned and successfully refounded the city.²⁰ These events are not manifested on the archaeological record, which indicate a constant occupation and prosperity of the city between the mid-5th and the late 4th c. BC.

The cemetery of the Late Classical and Early Hellenistic periods was excavated in 1972 to the east of the archaeological site. Within a short distance lies the cemetery of the Roman period. Among others, it includes Scythian-type burials with tumuli on top of the burial pits, burials in amphoras and simple [pit graves](#).²¹

5. Roman period

In the early 1st c. AD a new wall was built around Nikonion, which remained a middle-sized town until the 3rd century, when it was eventually abandoned. The Roman city seems to have flourished. Coins, amphoras and pottery are among the finds. The lack of inscriptions, however, should be noted (apart from the roughly-made graffiti on some vessel bases).

6. Coinage

The city's coinage is quite known. Nikonion minted bronze coins in the second quarter of the 5th c. BC depicting an owl and the inscription ΣΚ, ΣΚΥ or ΣΚΥΛ on the front. The verso was adorned with a four-spoke wheel, a dolphin or an arrow head. These



numismatic types imitate those of Olbia and Histros, while they indisputably evidence the fact that the Scythian king Scyllis dominated the city for some time.²² A large number of foreign coins from Histros were in circulation in the city during the same period, which proves the strong relations between the two cities.²³ A few Macedonian coins also appeared in the city in the Hellenistic period.

1. Pseudo-Scylax, *Periplus* 68; Stephanus Byzantium, see entry “Νικῶνιον/Nikonion”, locates the city in error on the estuary of Istros (Danube), instead of Tyras (Dniester) River.
2. Strabo, 7.3.16. The city is also reported by the geographer Claudius Ptolemy 3.10.8.
3. See Avram, A. – Hind, J. – Tsetschladze, G., “The Black Sea Area”, in Hansen, M.H. – Nielsen, T.H. (edit.), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis. An Investigation Conducted by the Copenhagen Polis Centre for the Danish National Research Foundation* (Oxford 2004), p. 935.
4. Sekerskaya, N.M., “Nikonion”, in Tsetschladze, G. (edit.), *North Pontic Archaeology. Recent Discoveries and Studies* (Colloquia Pontica 6, Leiden 2001), p. 67.
5. Avram, A. – Hind, J. – Tsetschladze, G., “The Black Sea Area”, in Hansen, M.H. – Nielsen, T.H. (edit.), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis. An Investigation Conducted by the Copenhagen Polis Centre for the Danish National Research Foundation* (Oxford 2004), p. 936.
6. Ochotnikov, S.B., “The Chorai of the Ancient Cities in the Lower Dniester Area (6th century BC-3rd century AD)”, in Guldager Bilde, P. – Stolba, V.F. (edit.), *Surveying the Greek Chora: The Black Sea Region in a Comparative Perspective* (Aarhus 2006), pp. 81-98.
7. Hdt., 4.51; according to Hind, J., “Herodotus on the Black Sea Coastline and Greek Settlements: Some Modern Misconceptions”, in Tsetschladze, G.R. – Snodgrass, A. (edit.), *Greek Settlements in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea* (BAR –International Series 1062, Oxford 2004), p. 44, the term includes the inhabitants of both Tyras and Nikonion.
8. Κορομηλά, Μ., *Οι Έλληνες στη Μαύρη Θάλασσα. Από την Εποχή του Χαλκού ως τις αρχές του 20ού αιώνα* (Athens 1991), p. 119.
9. Avram, A. – Hind, J. – Tsetschladze, G., “The Black Sea Area”, in Hansen, M.H. – Nielsen, T.H. (edit.), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis. An Investigation Conducted by the Copenhagen Polis Centre for the Danish National Research Foundation* (Oxford 2004), p. 936.
10. IG ³ 71.IV.167· Avram, A., “Poleis und Nicht-Poleis im Ersten und Zweiten Attischen Seebund”, in Hansen, M.H. – Raaflaub, K. (edit.), *Studies in the Ancient Greek Polis, Papers from the Copenhagen Polis Center 2* (Stuttgart 1995), p. 197.
11. According to Buisikh, S.B., in Ochotnikov, S.B., *Nikonij i antichnyj mir Severnogo Pricernomor' ja* (Odessa 1997), pp. 98-102, Nikonion founded 16 rural settlements in the Archaic period and 69 in the Classical and Hellenistic periods.
12. Vinogradov, Y.G., *Pontische Studien. Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte und Epigraphik des Schwarzmeerraumes* (Mainz 1997), p. 323.
13. Vinogradov, Y.G., “Istriya, Tira I Nikonij, pokinutij I vozrozhdenij”, *Numismatika i Epigrafika* 16 (1999), pp. 50-71.
14. Arr., *Peripl. M. Eux.* 87.
15. Sekerskaya, N.M., “Nikonion”, in Tsetschladze, G. (edit.), *North Pontic Archaeology. Recent Discoveries and Studies* (Colloquia Pontica 6, Leiden 2001), pp. 71-72.
16. Sekerskaya, N.M., “Nikonion”, in Tsetschladze, G. (edit.), *North Pontic Archaeology. Recent Discoveries and Studies* (Colloquia Pontica 6, Leiden 2001), p. 71.
17. Sekerskaya, N.M., “Nikonion”, in Samoylova, T.L. (edit.), *Ancient Greek Sites on the Northwestern Coast of the Black Sea* (Kiev 2001), pp. 132-134.



18. Sekerskaya, N.M., "Nikonion", in Samoylova, T.L. (edit.), *Ancient Greek Sites on the Northwestern Coast of the Black Sea* (Kiev 2001), pp. 127 and 128, respectively.
19. Sekerskaya, N.M., "Nikonion", in Samoylova, T.L. (edit.), *Ancient Greek Sites on the Northwestern Coast of the Black Sea* (Kiev 2001), pp. 118, 120, 122, 124, 125, 129.
20. The account appears on an inscription found in the city of Tyras: Vinogradov, Y.G., "Istriya, Tira I Nikonij, pokinutij I vozrozhdenyj", *Numismatika i Epigrafika* 16 (1999), pp. 50-71.
21. Sekerskaya, N.M., "Nikonion", in Tsetskhladze, G. (edit.), *North Pontic Archaeology. Recent Discoveries and Studies*, *Colloquia Pontica* 6 (Leiden 2001), p. 70.
22. Alekseev, V.P. – Loboda, P.G., "Rare and Unique Coins of Antique cities of the Northern Black Sea Region and coins of Greek World found on their territories", *The Bulletin of the Odessa Museum of Numismatics* 21 (2005), no. 1.
23. Vinogradov, Y.G., *Pontische Studien. Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte und Epigraphik des Schwarzmeerraumes* (Mainz 1997), pp. 35, 209; Avram, A. – Hind, J. – Tsetskhladze, G., "The Black Sea Area", in Hansen, M.H. – Nielsen T.H. (edit.), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis. An Investigation Conducted by the Copenhagen Polis Centre for the Danish National Research Foundation* (Oxford 2004), p. 936.

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Glossary :

	amphora, the from the greek words "αμφι"(on both sides) and "φέρω" (carry): vessel with long ovoid body and a considerably narrower neck made in various sizes from the smaller perfume oil container to the large storage receivers of liquids and solids. It stands on a small foot and it bears two invariable vertical handles on either side. Some of the distinguished types of the amphorae are these whose lower part is tapering to the point (narrow bottomed), the neck type, the Nicosthenian, the Nola, the Panathenaic, the Tyrrhenian, the SOS type.
	kantharos, the a deep drinking vessel with two distinctive high handles and an often tall stem of the foot. Kantharoi are frequently depicted on black- and red-figure vases, held by Dionysos or Herakles.
	Komastes, the The person participating in the "Komos", the orgiastic dance in honour of Dionysus. For the archaeologists, the komastai are the dancers related to the symposium and the wine-drinking.
	kylix, the The most essential ancient drinking cup. It bears a wide and shallow body raised on a stem from a foot. It always has horizontal handles disposed symmetrically, often swinging upwards . The interior, flat, round bottom of the vessel was used as surface for painted decoration. There are many different types of kylikes such as the Komast type, the Siana type, types A, B, C, the Droop and the Cassel cups.
	lekythos, the A perfumed oil container with a narrow mouth and one vertical handle. There are lots of variants of this shape. They are predominant during the 5th c. BC. A common find is also the aryballoid lekythos with a globular and squat body. White lekythoi were used solely as votive offerings in burials.
	pelike, the another version of the amphora. It appears for the first time in 520 BC. It consists of a globular body, a short neck, a projecting thick rim, vertical handles and a short base. Due to its stability, merchants used to store in it valuable ointments for sale.



pit grave

Simple form of grave which was dug into earth. It could accommodate one or more individuals.



red figure technique, the

Decorative technique in pottery, in which the figures are represented in red colour on the vase's dark background, while the details of the clothes and of the anatomy are given with incised lines.



skyphos

A deep vessel with an open rim and an almost hemispherical shape.