

Where Was the First Council of Nicea?

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THIS PAST SUMMER marked the 1,700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicea, which adopted the Nicene Creed, a foundational church document that is still recognized by nearly all Christian denominations today. After almost two millennia, however, the memory of where exactly in Nicea this council took place has vanished. In this article, we explore new archaeological evidence from an ancient basilica discovered beneath the waters of Lake İznik in northwestern Turkey that may finally resolve this longstanding mystery.

The First Council of Nicea, which met for two months in the summer of 325 CE, is celebrated as the key point in the emergence of Christianity as it transitioned from a persecuted clandestine

movement to a faith operating freely with Roman imperial sanction. The council is also recognized as the first truly ecumenical council of the emerging church, where an effort was made to gather bishops from across the early Christian world to reach agreement on important theological and administrative matters.

Given the council's significance, scholars have long sought to identify the exact location (or locations) in ancient Nicea (modern İznik in northwestern Turkey) where the meeting may have taken place. The most helpful clues as to the meeting's location are found in the writings of the fourth-century church historian Eusebius, who attended the council as bishop

FIRST COUNCIL. The first-ever ecumenical church council met in 325 CE in the city of Nicea (modern İznik in northwestern Turkey). Although its main outcome, the Nicene Creed, remains a founding document of Christian faith, the exact place where the proceedings took place was lost in the mists of time. Archaeological discoveries from Nicea are providing fresh clues about the location and significance of the church that reportedly hosted the high-stakes meeting presided over by Emperor Constantine the Great (r. 306-337). This 16th-century fresco from the Stavronikita Monastery in Greece depicts the famous assembly, with Constantine sitting in the center surrounded by the attending bishops.



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of Caesarea Maritima. In particular, Eusebius mentions *two* places where the council met: “From all the churches which filled Europe, Libya and Asia, the choicest of the servants of God were brought together; and one place of worship, as if extended by God, took them in all together” (*Life of Constantine* 3.7.1). Here, Eusebius described the initial meeting place as a church (“one place of worship” or literally “house of prayer”). In his description of the conclusion of the council, however, Eusebius gives a second venue: “the innermost hall of [Constantine’s] palace, which appeared to exceed the rest in size” (*Life of Constantine* 3.10.1). The place of worship is described “as if extended by God,” suggesting the initial venue was not large enough to accommodate the attendees, while the palace was exceedingly large, with plenty of room for aisles and chairs.

But where were the church and palace that Eusebius mentions? Although the location of Constantine’s palace

remains a mystery (see “Where Was Constantine’s Palace?” p. 36), the only known fourth-century church in Nicea is the submerged basilica found in 2014 beneath the waters of Lake İznik (known in antiquity as Lake Ascania) that excavator Mustafa Şahin and I believe may preserve the remains of the church where the council first met.* Here, I present new archaeological, historical, and artistic evidence that this basilica began as a shrine to an early Christian martyr before it was transformed into a martyrium church that served as the initial venue for the first council.¹

During the first three centuries of its existence, Christianity was bitterly persecuted by Roman authorities. The persecutions, though often sporadic and occurring in different places at different times, resulted in the deaths of thousands of martyrs. Yet the faith kept growing, so much so that in 313 Constantine and his then co-emperor Licinius jointly issued the Edict of Milan that made Christianity a licit religion throughout the empire. Those martyrs lost to the persecutions were not forgotten. Their places of execution or burial were memorialized as shrines and places of worship by the communities they left behind, frequently preserving relics and other objects associated with the life or death of

SLAYING THE SAINT. The lavishly decorated *Menologion of Basil II*—a liturgical book produced on parchment around 1000 CE—contains a collection of saints’ lives arranged according to the church calendar. Illustrating the section on Neophytos of Nicea, who was martyred in 303, this page depicts the saint’s execution by a Roman soldier on the shores of Lake Ascania (Lake İznik), outside the city. Some suggest a simple shrine was built on the spot shortly after his death to commemorate this early Christian martyr.

* Mustafa Şahin and Mark R. Fairchild, “Nicea’s Underwater Basilica,” *BAR*, November/December 2018.

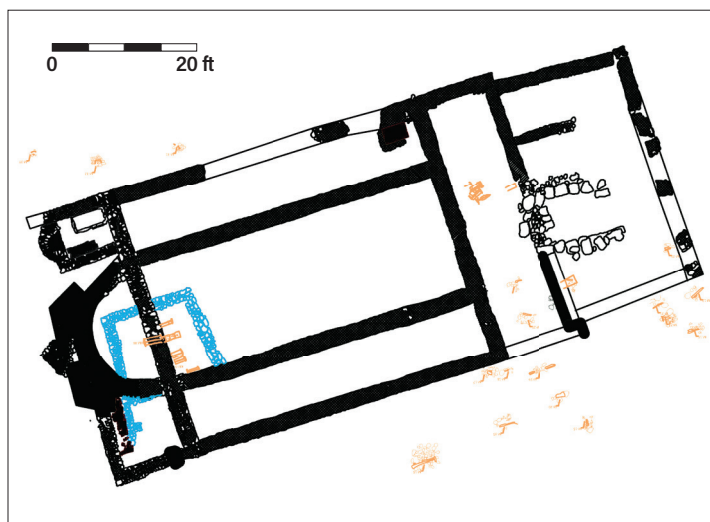




WATERFRONT BASILICA. These partially submerged ruins just outside the ancient city of Nicea belong to a fourth-century basilica. Originally standing on the banks of Lake Ascania, they were later swallowed by the rising water. Recent explorations revealed a square-shaped structure (see plan, marked in blue) under the apse of the basilica that clearly predates the church. Built with crudely laid field stones and mortar, this might be the initial shrine honoring the Christian martyr Neophytos. Marked in orange on the plan are early Christian graves.

the martyr. Following the Edict of Milan, many of these shrines were converted into martyria (commemorative churches), including at Nicea where, according to a late Byzantine tradition that mixes history with miraculous and legendary tales, a young Christian named Neophytos was martyred a decade before the edict.

Born to Christian parents, Neophytos reportedly displayed unusual piety at a young age and performed miracles for his friends, even raising his mother from the dead. At the age of ten, he moved to the nearby hills and lived in a cave for five years. At the time of the Great Persecution under Emperor Diocletian in 303, Neophytos returned and reproached Nicea's governor in public. He was thrown to the lions. However, the lions bowed down to him and did him no harm. Enraged, the governor ordered a soldier to slay the saint with



DRAWING BY MUSTAFA SAHIN & BAS

his sword. The earliest document supporting the tradition—a tenth-century imperial menologium illustrating the lives of the saints and now housed in the Vatican Library—shows Neophytos being executed outside of Nicea's city walls, on the shore of Lake Ascania.

I believe the basilica found submerged beneath the

waters of Lake İznik is the last and best-preserved phase of the martyrion church that commemorated the place of Neophytos's execution. Typically, churches would have been built inside the city walls and would not have been so close to the lake. However, the location of Neophytos's death dictated that the martyrion be constructed *outside* of the city on the shore of the lake, which is

exactly where the basilica was located in the fourth century, before it was swallowed by the waters of Lake İznik centuries later.

More importantly, the site's archaeology shows that the basilica actually began as a simple shrine before it developed into the martyrion church that was used by the first council. Drone photos of the site clearly

Where Was Constantine's Palace?

Despite years of searching, the location of Constantine's Nicene palace is still unknown, though there are clues to be found in the city's archaeology, if you know where to look.

Modern İznik overlays most of Constantine's city, with its ancient remains often concealed 10 feet or more below the surface. Fortunately, the city's ancient walls, which encircled Nicea on three sides opposite Lake İznik, can still be traced for more than 3 miles. Most of the wall is made of roughly laid bricks, fieldstones, and mortar built in the mid-third century CE. Along the city's northern wall, however, there is

a 325-foot section of well-dressed stone ashlar more typical of Roman imperial construction (see left). An eighth-century Greek inscription preserved on one of the wall's towers (below) suggests these Roman ashlars were in secondary position, having been used to repair a breach in the wall suffered during the Umayyad siege of Nicea in 727.

Could this restored section of Nicea's city wall contain the remains of Constantine's palace? Along with the ashlar blocks, a number of reused columns can be seen in the restored section of the wall. The ashlar and columns used to fill the breach must have come from a nearby structure, one that was built to the highest Roman imperial standards. I believe this structure may have been Constantine's palace, which was likely located somewhere nearby in the city's northwestern quarter.

Left: Nicea's northern wall, built with well-dressed ashlar.

Below: Tower in the northern city wall, with commemorative Greek inscription.



BOTH PHOTOS BY MARK FAIRCHILD



EXTENDED BY GOD. After the Edict of Milan (313 CE), the earliest shrine to Neophytos was incorporated into a larger martyrium (commemorative church). What must have been a largely wooden structure is now discernible only from pieces of charcoal and wood, including large supporting beams found beneath the marble floor of the later basilica (above), as well as a large number of nails (right). Eusebius, who attended the First Council of Nicea, writes that the church hosting the assembly was seemingly “extended by God” to accommodate the gathered bishops. The wooden church would have served the purpose and provided a suitable venue to welcome a church council only two decades after the local martyr’s death.

indicate that a small, square-shaped structure underlies the apse of the basilica. This structure, which consists of crudely laid field stones and mortar, must predate the late-fourth-century basilica and, therefore, is presumably the original shrine built to commemorate Neophytos.

Shortly after the Edict of Milan, a martyrium church was built around the shrine. Evidence for the remains of this church is scant, however, because it was likely constructed of wood, as indicated by the wood, charcoal, and large number of nails discovered around the site. Moreover, the recent discovery of large wooden girders under the marble floor of the later basilica makes this suggestion highly likely. This wooden church is where the initial gathering of the First Council of Nicea took place. Although we can say little of this church’s plan or features, Eusebius may provide a clue as to its size. He



PHOTO COURTESY MUSTAFA ŞAHİN

writes that the church where the council met was seemingly “extended by God,” implying it was barely able to accommodate the attending bishops. Estimates of the attendees range from 250 to 318 bishops. If we allow 9 square feet per person, we can imagine a relatively small

Buried Bishops

In the early eighth century, the bishop of Nicea asked Gregory of Caesarea to write a narrative description of the first council. This request was probably made because Gregory still had the notes of Eusebius that were kept at Caesarea. Known as the *Laudation of the 318 Fathers*, the document was sent to Nicea to celebrate and remember this important event. The *Laudation* refers to an earlier source that listed the council's attendees, including bishops Chrysanthus and Musonius, who both died during the two months the council was in session. Intriguingly, the source stated that both were buried "in the church" where the council met.

The *Life of Constantine*, written by an anonymous author a century later, also mentions Chrysanthus and Musonius. Like the *Laudation*, it relates that these bishops attended the council and passed away during the proceedings. However, the text adds a hagiographic story: Once the Nicene Creed had been agreed upon and signed by the attendees, the document was placed overnight on the tombs of the deceased saints. The next day, the document was retrieved with the miraculous signatures of the two bishops.

Could two of the tombs found at the underwater basilica in Nicea be the burials of Chrysanthus and Musonius, where these miraculous events allegedly took place? Perhaps future study of the 18 burials found inside the church will resolve this question as well.

church that measured approximately 75 by 35 feet.

In the second half of the fourth century, the wooden church was replaced by a large stone basilica, which is the structure that Şahin and his team have excavated.² At that time, the martyr's relics were moved from the shrine to a sarcophagus that was placed in a room beside the church's apse. Although only fragments of the sarcophagus survive at the site today, one of its ornately carved panels was discovered more than a century ago and is now on display at the İznik Museum along with other artifacts from the site.

Finally, at least three dozen tombs and burials discovered in and around the basilica strongly suggest the church began as a shrine to Neophytos. During the Byzantine period, many Christians believed the holiness of martyred saints radiated out from their tombs, and, as such, often chose to be buried alongside or in close proximity to a martyr's shrine. Of the 36 burials excavated at the site, half were found inside the church and at least six of these were discovered within the small square-shaped structure beneath the apse that was likely the original shrine. Later Byzantine texts even suggest that two bishops who passed away during the first council's proceedings may have been buried at the site (see "Buried Bishops").

So, why did Constantine choose this martyrion church in Nicea as the venue for the first council? First, most of the participants, traveling from great distances, would come by sea. Nicea provided near access to the



PEACE ETERNAL. Fragments of a stone sarcophagus were discovered in a room adjacent to the church's apse. This large panel is now on display in an open-air museum in İznik. The material and decoration project the deceased's importance and imply the sarcophagus was intended for display and commemoration. Archaeologists believe Neophytos's remains were removed from the original shrine and put into this ornate sarcophagus following the construction of the basilica in the second half of the fourth century.



SUNKEN SAINTS. Multiple burials were discovered in and around the basilica, half a dozen of them within the original shrine under the basilica's apse. Burials near the graves of martyrs were common well into the Middle Ages, reflecting the belief that the deceased might benefit from their posthumous proximity to a saint. Much simpler than the sarcophagus of Neophytos, the burials consist of terracotta roofing tiles arranged like a gable roof around the coffin, with another tile closing the tomb at the head and one more at the foot. The seams may have been sealed with wax or clay.

Propontis coast (Marmara Sea), thus making travel easier and encouraging greater attendance. Second, Constantine himself had a palace at Nicea, which made his presence at the meetings comfortable and effortless. Finally, the choice of the martyrion church was symbolic. Holding the first council in the shrine to Neophytos showed that the period of persecution had finally ended and that the Christian faith had entered a new phase with imperial sanction. Similarly, the shift in venues from the martyrion church, located outside the city walls, to Constantine's palace, located inside the city, may have symbolized Christianity's new position at the center of civic life under the protection of the state.

Written traditions report that the church of the Nicene council was standing and recognized as the place of the meetings at least until the earthquakes of the 11th century. Michael Attaleiates, a Byzantine chronicler and historian living in Constantinople at the time, felt the shocks and reported:

[An earthquake] happened in Nikaia [Nicea] in Bithynia and brought almost total devastation and ruin to the place. Its most important and large

churches—[including] the one of the Holy Fathers, where the Council of the most Holy and Orthodox Fathers against Areios confirmed its decisions and where Orthodoxy was proclaimed openly to shine brighter than the sun—[...] were shaken and collapsed, as did the walls of the city.³

After this destruction, memory of the church's location seems to have faded. Indeed, it was also around this time that the rising waters of Lake Ascania began to encroach on the Neophytos shrine and basilica, with continued seismic activity eventually submerging the entire structure. It is only now, more than a thousand years later, that archaeology is finally revealing the church's secrets and its possible connections to one of the most formative events in Christian history. ☩

¹ For a fuller treatment of the evidence, see Mark R. Fairchild, *The Underwater Basilica of Nicaea: Archeology in the Birthplace of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024).

² Once the wooden church was replaced with the masonry basilica, much of the wood was reused on structures elsewhere or used as firewood. Most of the nails would have been extracted and used elsewhere.

³ Michael Attaleiates, *The History*, Anthony Kaldellis and Dimitris Krallis, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 165–167.