One If by Land, Two If by Sea.

Traveling to Nicaea for the Council of 325

Mark Wilson

Introduction

"One if by land, and two, if by sea." So goes the line in Henry W. Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride." This famous poem recalls an incident in America's foundation story about a Boston patriot who established a secret signal to alert his compatriots to how the British forces would advance to Concord. A candle lit in one lantern meant that enemy troops were using the longer land route; candles in two lanterns meant they were taking the shorter route by water. "If one were to think of a perfect symbol of the American Revolutionary War, perhaps short of the Declaration of Independence itself, it would probably be Paul Revere's lanterns."

While this article will say nothing about lanterns, it will discuss the land and sea routes that early church leaders took to Nicaea, where they drafted the foundational document of Christianity, which is still professed by Christians around the world. Visitors to İznik (ancient Nicaea) today see little more than a sleepy rural town situated among expanses of olive groves on the east end of a scenic lake. It is hard to imagine that in the Roman period Nicaea vied with Nicomedia (modern İzmit) to be the capital and leading city of the province of Bithynia. Today neighboring İzmit is a bustling industrial city situated on the main highway between Istanbul and Ankara. Yet Nicaea was to be the center not only of Bithynia but of the whole Roman Empire for a moment in time in 325 CE. There Constantine convened the first ecumenical council. This article will first address some issues of historical background regarding these cities. Next to be presented is the geographical and hodological situation both of Nicomedia and Nicaea.

Nicaea's four gates and their relationship to Bithynia's road network will be discussed in depth. It will conclude by offering a fresh hypothesis regarding how the emperor, some bishops, and their attendants might have traveled to Nicaea to reach this historic council.

Background of the First Ecumenical Council

For the residents of Nicaea, the year 325 began with political stability restored to the province of Bithynia and to the Roman Empire. From Nicomedia on June 14, 313, Licinius had issued the edict of toleration that allowed Christians to worship without fear of persecution.

However, a civil war broke out for control of the empire between Licinius and his brother-in-law Constantine. After defeating Licinius at the naval battle of the Hellespont in July 324 and the land battle of Chrysopolis in September 324, Constantine, after accepting his rival's surrender in Nicomedia shortly thereafter, became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. The year 325 also found imperial and ecclesiastical officials preparing to travel to Nicomedia for Constantine's vicennalia. However, the emperor decided to hold a council beforehand to unify the church now torn theologically by the Arian controversy. The logistics of moving hundreds of bishops and their attendants from around the empire was a daunting one. Then, at the last minute, Constantine changed the council's location from Ancyra to Nicaea.

Barnes cites three reasons for the change: (1) bishops from the West could reach Nicaea more easily; (2) the climate was more temperate; and (3) the emperor could attend more easily.

In reality, there were few participants from the West. As Gwynn notes, "The overwhelming majority of those bishops were from the Greek-speaking East."

Two presbyters represented the bishop of Rome, and single bishops came from Gaul, Dacia, Dalmatia, Pannonia, and Persia. Therefore, its ecumenical nature was in word only.

Hosius of Cordoba, who probably presided over the council, was already in the East after presiding over the Council of Antioch in 324/325.

Nicomedia and Nicaea: The "First Cities" of Bithynia

From the Hellenistic period onwards, Nicomedia and Nicaea were the two main cities of Bithynia.

After the Romans established the province in 74 BCE, Nicomedia became its first capital. In 29 BCE Augustus authorized an imperial cult temple dedicated to Rome and to himself to be built in Nicomedia, while in Nicaea a sanctuary for Divus Julius and Dea Roma was built for the Roman residents in that city. Sometime after the death of Augustus in 14 CE the provincial assembly (koinon) and the governor moved from Nicaea to Nicomedia.

The two cities continually vied for prominence, especially in the titles so important

to Greek cities. Orations 38 and 39 of Dio Chrysostom, the orator and philosopher from nearby Prusa (Bursa), addressed their ongoing strife in the late 90s CE. He proposed concord (homonoia) between the two cities rather than vying for status as "first" (prote) or "metropolis" of the province.
However, as Bekker-Nielsen laments, "needless to say, both Nicomedians and Nicaeans ignored his advice, and the conflict played on throughout the second century."
Two notable Roman historians came from these cities: Arrian (d. ca. 160 CE) from Nicomedia, and Cassius Dio (d. ca. 235) from Nicaea. In 284 Diocletian was proclaimed emperor on a hill outside of Nicomedia, and he rebuilt the city as his new Rome, making Nicomedia the chief capital of his tetrarchy.

A reason for this, according to Doonan, is that it "was particularly well placed to dominate the Roman transport system, set directly on the easternmost extension of the Propontis at the head of the road systems along the north Anatolian rift valley."
Nicomedia, "the chief city of Bithynia," was honored again when Constantine built a large and splendid church there from his own funds to give thanks for victory over his enemies (Eusebius, Vit. Const. 3.50.1).
Given the centuries-long rivalry between these major cities, it is difficult to sustain the observation that "Nicomedia's location was vastly superior to that of Nicaea."
Further, it was Nicaea, not Nicomedia, whose location turned out to be superior for the site of the council in 325. Nicaea: The City with Four Gates The geographer Strabo describes Nicaea as a Hellenistic foundation and metropolis of Bithynia. He describes its plan: "The city is sixteen stadia (ca. 2,960 m) in circuit and is quadrangular in shape; it is situated in a plain, and has four gates; and its streets are cut at right angles, so that the four gates can be seen from one stone which is set up in the middle of the gymnasium" (Geogr. 12.4.7).
Through these four original gates, rebuilt or restored multiple times because of earthquakes and the Gothic sacking in 258, visitors to the city arrived, including emperors, senators, and the bishops in 325.
The east and west gates were connected by the cardo maximus (Kılıçaslan Caddesi), running ca. 1,308 m through the city; the north and south gates were connected by the decumanus maximus (Atatürk Caddesi), running ca. 1,473 m. These gates start to appear on Nicaea's coinage in the third century CE. Lichtenberger writes, "Remarkable of the coin depictions are the regular layout of the walls . . . and the emphasis on the single-arched city gates. . . . Their depiction is consistent with the archaeological evidence."
From these gates, as Weissova and Pavúk express, "the roads themselves radiate from Iznik toward all the four cardinal points, presumably likewise since the Hellenistic period. ."
The north gate (modern Istanbul Gate) "is believed to be the most important and therefore the most impressive of Nicaea's four gates."
It was reerected by Vespasian and restored by Hadrian. This was once called the Byzantium/Constantinople Gate. However, this name must be anachronistic because its orientation was initially to Nicomedia. Yet, perhaps because of civic competition, the Nicaeans refrained from putting their rival's name to a gate, despite its orientation. This gate and the east gate are structurally triple gates. An inscription in the middle east gate (Le?e Kapısı) states that the proconsul Marcus Plancius Varus built it for the emperor Vespasian with the help of the leading citizen C. Cassius Chrestos. After an earthquake heavily damaged Nicaea in 120 CE, Hadrian provided funds to rebuild the city. An inscription to Hadrian in the architrave suggests that the eastern gate was rededicated to the emperor upon his visit in 123 CE. After Nicaea chose the losing side with Pescennius Niger in 193 CE, Nicomedia, which supported Septimius Severus, successfully petitioned to have the title "first of the province" erased from this gate. For the west gate facing the lake and its harbor, only part of the north tower and the base of the south one have survived.
The south gate (modern Yenişehir) was reerected by Claudius II around 268–70 CE.
Nicaea's geography, oriented around these gates, contributed to its development "for it was located at intersection point of the roads which provided access to important cities." Where these gates led from this transportation node will be discussed next.

Travel Eastwards
The east gate was a very important junction point "through which the whole traffic of the empire passed, moving from the North to the East and vice versa."
Traffic out of Nicaea's east gate veered south of a ridge upon which sat a monumental sarcophagus today called Berberkaya. It continued eastwards through a plain before veering south again above modern Çiçekli. A milestone dating from Diocletian was found near Karadin/Karatekin. The track then turned southeastwards toward the mutatio

at Schinae (south of modern Gaziler). At Mygdum/Midum, northwest of modern Osmaneli, the road entered the valley of the Sangarius River

From Mygdum the road continued east toward Juliopolis (modern Çayırhan) and Ancyra (modern Ankara). This route, which continued to Antioch and Jerusalem, is today called the "Pilgrim's Way."

Milestones began to appear as early as Trajan, and, as Doonan notes, "the 'Pilgrim Road' from Nicomedia to the central Anatolian plateau seems to have received a lot of investment in the early third century, possibly in connection with Caracalla's Parthian campaign of 216–17 CE."

The regions of bishops arriving from the east might include Hosius from Antioch (1), Palestine (19), Phoenicia (10), Coele-Syria (22), Arabia (6), Mesopotamia (4), Persia (1), Cilicia (10), Cappadocia (10), Armenia Minor (4), Armenia Maior (5), and Galatia (5), totaling 97 bishops coming from this direction.

Travel Southwards and Southwestwards

The south gate provided access to two routes south and west of Nicaea.

A road running south is not depicted in the Barrington Atlas; however, French shows one and labels it C9. It intersected with two routes that ran east and southeast from Prusa toward the next transportation node at Dorylaeum (modern Eskişehir).

A second route turned westwards after the gate to circle the south side of Lake Ascania. After 5 miles (8 km the track passed below a rocky promontory today called Karacakaya. Remains of fortification walls dating to the Byzantine period are found around its peak. Because its favorable position overlooking both Nicaea's harbor and the lake, Weissova and Altın propose "the place might have served as a watchtower as well as a lighthouse."

After leaving the lakeshore and crossing the peninsula to Cius, the road turned southwards to Prusa, the third city of Bithynia. As Jones writes, Prusa's situation gave it a good but not preeminent place in the road system of the region. . . . Prusa's advantage lay in its position on the lines of communication between these two cities [Nicaea and Nicomedia] and those of the northwestern Aegean, since the great natural obstacle of Olympus deflects these routes around its shoulder.

Traffic coming from the great cities of Asia such as Pergamum, Smyrna, and Ephesus also passed through Prusa. Bishops coming from the important sees in western and southwestern Anatolia would have arrived via these roads through Nicaea's south gate.

The regions of the bishops arriving from the south would probably include Asia (7), Lydia (9), Phrygia (8), Pisidia (12), Pamphylia (7), Isauria (18), Caria (5), and Bithynia (8), totaling 74 bishops coming from this direction.

Travel from the North

Ine Jacobs has suggested that delegates "coming from overseas would have disembarked in Nicomedia, and, like Constantine himself, still needed to travel two more days south to reach their final destination."

This observation will receive extensive discussion since, as just discussed, there is little debate regarding how some 167 delegates arrived from the east and south-southwest. The road network between Nicomedia and Nicaea is first described in the third-century CE Itinerarium Antonini, which lists a route mentioning Nicomedia, Libum, and Nicaea (It. Ant. 140–42). The distance given is 44 Roman miles (RM).

The Itinerarium Burdigalense, written by the Bordeaux pilgrim (ca. 333–34) and dating shortly after the council (It. Burd. 573), provides mileage from Nicomedia: "Change at Eribolum—miles x. Halt at Libum—miles xi. Change at Liada—miles xii. City of Nicia—miles ix."

It gives a total distance of 42 RM. The Tabula Peutingeriana depicts Nicaea as a major traffic junction. The distance between it and the road station at Eribolo is given as 33 RM. Although a road trace continuing to Nicomedia is absent, a distance of 12 RM is shown for a total of 45 RM.

The totals depicted are 44 RM on Antonine, 42 RM by the Bordeaux pilgrim, and 45 RM on Peutinger for a variant of 3 RM. This converts to 62–67 km for the distance between the two cities on the itineraries.

The Peutinger map incorrectly situates Cius inland below Lake Ascania.

It shows another road from Nicaea running along the upper shore of the lake to Pronetios (Prainetos).

Two bridges dated to the Roman period are on this line: Kuru ("Dry") Köprü and Koca ("Large") Köprü.

The latter once spanned the Pharmutios River (modern Karasu).

This seems to be the bridge described by Procopius that had been built in earlier times but swept away by floodwaters (Aedif. 5.3.4–6). This required Justinian to build a new and improved bridge that would withstand future torrents.

Fingarova suggests that this bridge "formed part of an important road that connected Nicomedia to Nicaea."

However, French fails to include these bridges in his discussion of this route.

Foss, citing Procopius, states, "Justinian, some time before 548, abolished the public post between Chalcedon and Dacibyza, west of Nicomedia, ordering messengers instead to proceed directly across the Gulf to Helenopolis and thence straight to Nicaea, a saving of a considerable distance" (Hist. Arc. 30.8–11).

Therefore, these bridges are better related to this updated route along the northern shore of the lake to Helenopolis (modern Hersek), founded by Constantine in 327 to honor his mother, rather than to the original route running to Nicomedia.

A hiking trail called the Tolerance Way purports to be "the trail that we think extended from Izmit (Nicomedia) — the capital and the only metropolis of the period— to Iznik (Nicaea)."

However, its route after Astacus tracks significantly east from the route depicted in the itineraries and in the Barrington Atlas. It begins in modern İzmit near the imperial temple discovered in the Çukurbağ neighborhood and ends at the Hagia Sophia Church in İznik. After crossing the restored bridge at Başiskele, the route continued on the east side of the Astacus Gulf before bending southwest to pass through Astacus, opposite Nicomedia (Memnon, FGrH 434 F12).

Here the Tolerance Way turns south toward Bahçecik, while the route of the Roman road continued along the southern shore to Eribolon.

Weissova adopts an obscure route between the Tolerance and the Barrington routes, one Von Diest described in 1898 and Şahin tentatively approves.

She curiously disregards the results of Least Cost Path Analysis (LCPA) as well as the route described in the early itineraries.

While noting that French's projected route, originally thought by her to be "most probable," also agrees with LCPA, she nevertheless adopts a route in all her maps that goes through, rather than skirts, the western extension of the Samanlı Mountains.

Volume 2 of her dissertation is copiously illustrated with various versions of this base map. Significantly, no archaeological realia are depicted along her projected route except for the two bridges, discussed earlier, and a milestone marked just north of Nicaea.

As noted, the Peutinger map measures Eribolon's distance as 12 RM from Nicomedia.

Cassius Dio situates Eribolon as a port on the south shore of the Astacus Gulf (Epit. Xiph. 78.39.3).

However, neither Barrington nor Pleiades places it on the coast; both place it at modern Yeniköy.

The line of the road from Astacus would suggest a location for Eribolon southeast of the modern port at Golçuk (ancient Dioklides).

This is confirmed by an Ottoman caravanserai, Kazıklı Kervansarayı, which indicates the existence of a commercial track used for centuries. The partially restored caravanserai features a course of Roman ashlars along its foundation, undoubtedly spoliated from nearby Eribolon.

From here the route follows Beyoğlu Caddesi (Street) southwest to follow the lush valley of a small stream before climbing slowly to Libum (modern Sanaiye). The itineraries identify Libum as a mansio (inn) since it is a day's travel from Nicomedia 32 km. Half of that distance is at sea level; however, from Eribolon the track rises over 580 m. to Libum. No remains of the ancient rest stop are found in the village today.

From Libum the road makes a steep climb of over 300 m to a ridge, with the highest point on the route at 885 m. It descends to a stretch of level road at 738 m that extends toward the mutatio (way station) at Liada. North of modern Sarıağil a raised roadbed can be seen in the oak forest with curbstones visible in places.

Nearby are the remains of a funerary monument that once stood along the road.

The route follows the village road through Sarıağil, where no remains of ancient Liada are visible. In French's day curbstones, spine, and surface of the ancient road could be seen.

From here and then passing Orhaniye, the road descends about 610 m toward the plain of the Pharmutios River. Turning southeastwards, the track then passed the funerary obelisk of Gaius Cassius Philiscus, which rises over 12 m and thus is visible for miles.

Whether this monument, standing at 130 m above sea level, was on the road is debated.

However, as Bekker-Nielsen observes, if it was, the obelisk "was flanked by life-sized or larger bronze sculptures, whose hands and feet were fixed to metal cramps in the recesses."

Its situation along the road would allow travelers to appreciate its bronze statues and read the inscription on the monument. Roads typically entered a city through a necropolis.

Peschlow writes about Nicaea, "The largest necropolis was situated to the northwest, around the modern village of Elbeyli."

This would align with the projected route from the obelisk to the north gate of Nicaea. With a distance of 26 km, the leg from Libum is somewhat shorter; however, the terrain is more difficult with switchbacks as it climbs and descends toward the shore of Lake Ascania. The distance calculated on Google Earth agrees with the calculation of 58 km found on ORBIS; however, it is 9 km shorter than found on the itineraries.

Jacobs suggests this distance, traversed by the emperor from Nicomedia, was "easily covered in two days of travel."

As just outlined, this road was not so "easily" traveled. The regions of the bishops arriving along this northern route would include Pontus Polemoniacus (3), Paphlagonia (3), and Bithynia (2), totaling 8 bishops traveling through Nicomedia to Nicaea’s north gate.

Travel Westwards Across the Lake

Nicaea was situated at the eastern end of Lake Ascania which stretched 32 km to its western shore.

The port on the lake was accessed through the city’s west gate. The north mole was situated approximately 370 m north of the gate while the south mole was 300 m to its south.

At the tip of the latter, a lighthouse perhaps stood on the circular base. Between these breakwaters, Gündüz and Dumankaya write that "there were no large-scale ships in the lake, so lowpriced wooden docks which could be shaped easily take precedence over concrete docks where heavy cargos could be loaded and unloaded." They propose that these docks were located on an axis straight west of the lake gate.

These archaeological finds confirm that Nicaea was an important port city in antiquity.

While Nicaea’s maritime situation was somewhat inferior to that of Nicomedia (Dio Chrysostom, Or. 38.22), its lacustrine location nevertheless had advantages. Pliny the Younger writes about Boane Lake (modern Sapanca) east of Nicomedia. "Across this lake, marble, agricultural produce, timber and building materials are carried by boat, with little effort and cost, as far as the main road; but from there to the coast by cart, requiring great effort and even greater expense" (Ep. 10.41.2).

Bekker-Nielson extrapolates, "If Pliny’s description of the advantages which the lake offers Nicomedia is anything to go by, then lake Ascanius must have offered even greater advantages for Nicaea. No wonder that the city prospered through the Hellenistic and into the first centuries of the Roman era."

Thus it is surprising that he also writes, "It is a fair assumption that the lower town of Nicomedia resembled Ostia or Puteoli, as described for us by Juvenal or Petronius, more than it resembled Nicaea."

Since the chora of Nicaea was more productive than that of Nicomedia, its lake port must have been a bustling one as well.

Boat traffic left the lake via a second port situated in a sheltered bay on its southwestern corner (modern Golyaka).

A straight road, typical of Roman construction, ran west for almost 9 km from the shore.

The road then crossed a low pass (στενός; Cassius Dio, Hist. 76[75].15.3) following the course of a stream (modern Karsak Deresi) that ran from the lake into the sea at the port of Cius or Prius ad Mare/Prousias (modern Gemlik).

Cius was situated on the eastern end of the Kianos Sinus (Gulf) on the southeastern shore of the Propontis (Sea of Marmara; Strabo, Geogr. 12.4.3). The narrow isthmus separating the lake from the gulf was approximately 18 km across. Roller calls Cius "an important landing point for the interior."

Looking through Nicaean eyes, Wilson writes that "while the landing-places of the north were most convenient for purposes of travel, the easiest way to the sea for heavy goods lay to the west, to Cius."

In addition to the extensive olive production that still characterizes the area, "legumes for the capital were delivered from Nicaea and its surroundings; the port of shipment could have been Cius."

The lake played a role in the defeat of Pescennius Niger’s forces in December 193. Septimius Severus mobilized his troops in Nicomedia and sailed from there to Cius to cross the pass and engage Niger’s army at the Battle of Nicaea (Herodian, Hist. 3.2.9). The battle was fought even from boats on the lake (Cassius Dio, Hist. 75.6).

After the Severan forces rallied, Niger and his remaining troops retreated by sailing to Nicaea, which supported him. After Niger was later beheaded, coinage both from Nicaea and Cius "produced reverses of Mars the pacifier and Peace herself, and Septimius is shown clasping hands with Jupiter."

Over a century later Zozimus (Hist. Nova 2.23-24, 26) describes the massive naval fleets assembled in the Sea of Marmara for the final battles between Constantine and Licinius in 324. Thus, a variety of ships were available in 325 for travel from Nicomedia to Nicaea by sea.

ORBIS calculates that a fast sea journey covering the 143 km between Nicomedia and Cius could be made in just over half a day.

A half-day walk from Cius brought travelers to the lake where an easy transfer by boat across the lake could be arranged. This itinerary contrasts considerably with the two-day low mountainous route between the two cities previously discussed. Given the challenge of taking an imperial contingent overland through such terrain, it is possible, even likely, that Constantine and his retinue traveled by ship to Cius so as to make the easy land and lake crossing to Nicaea. The regions of bishops arriving by sea via Cius might include those from Rome (2), Egypt (13), Thebes (2), Upper Libya (4), Lower Libya (1), Lycia (1), 83 Islands (4), Cyprus (2), Europe (1), Dacia (1), Calabria (2), Moesia (3), Africa (4), Macedonia (2), Dardania (1), Achaia (3), Thessaly (2), Dalmatia (1), Pannonia (1), Gauls (1), Goths (1), and Bosporus (1), totaling 53 participants.

The Attendees and Their Mode of Transport

The estimated number of attendees is, of course, related to the number of bishops who traveled to the council. The traditional number of 318 is usually reduced to some 250 bishops in attendance (cf. Eusebius, Vit. Const. 3.8). Projecting around 220 bishops, Gwynn estimates that the number of attendees was approximately two thousand persons. This total is derived from Constantine’s letter to Chrestus of Syracuse regarding the Council of Arles in 314.

You should secure from the most illustrious Latronianus, corrector of Sicily, a public vehicle, and you should choose two others of the second rank and take them with you. You should bring along three servants who may serve you on the way, and arrive to the above-mentioned place before the appointed day.

Thus five others were authorized to accompany Chrestus to Arles. Such a large entourage would have surely taxed cursus publicus, the imperial transportation system. Begun by Augustus as a way to communicate with his governors and legionary commanders—a system initially called vehiculio—by the fourth century it had morphed into an elaborate travel network used and abused by imperial and provincial officials.

Regarding the viability of the sea route proposed above, was the cursus publicus available for bishops who wished to travel by sea? Whiting thinks not.

The disadvantages of sea travel were the dangers, unpredictability, and dependence on the seasons and weather. There was also the cost of chartering passage to consider. For travelers with permission to use the services of the cursus publicus, the permit issued by the state was only valid for travel by land.

However, the geography of the empire suggests otherwise. Island provinces such as Britannia, Crete, and Cyprus required nautical transportation as did the provinces in North Africa. The ports of Brundisium and Dyrrachium, termini of the Via Appia and Via Egnatia respectively, similarly required a nautical leg to connect these major land routes.

Arguing that shipping connections formed part of the system since the time of Augustus, Anne Kolb observes, "Hinweise auf den Seeverkehr im Rahmen des cursus publicus geben noch weitere spätantike Zeugnisse."

For the Council at Arles bishops were summoned from "a great many different places" to arrive by August 1 (Constantine, Ep. 22). Those coming from Syracuse and Carthage had to travel by sea, so it can be assumed passage was provided for their entourage using a nautical cursus publicus.

Thus, the bishops and their attendants had the option to travel to Nicaea either by land or sea using the cursus publicus.

Nicaea and Constantine’s Vicennalia

The council concluded on July 19, and six days later the celebration of Constantine’s vicennalia started in order to mark the twentieth year of his rule. His reign had begun on July 25, 306, the day his father Constantius I died in Eboracum (modern York). To celebrate the occasion, the emperor hosted a banquet in the innermost imperial apartments of the palace, at which every bishop was present (Eusebius, Vit. Const. 3.15). Ramskold, citing Jerome (Chron. A326), believes that "the vicennial celebrations commenced at Nicomedia."

Gwynn similarly observes that "the famous banquet may have taken place not in Nicaea

but in the imperial palace in nearby Nicomedia, to which the bishops would have travelled en masse."
While Nicomedia was somewhat "nearby" in terms of distance, the transfer of the bishops and their entourages would have been a logistical challenge.
Even if only the bishops traveled there, several hundred persons would be traveling either by land or water. Eusebius uses the same word basileon for the imperial palace where the council met as well as the place where the banquet was held, without mentioning any change of venue to Nicomedia (Vit. Const. 10.1; 15.2).
Drake notes that Constantine had previously planned a meeting with the bishops in Nicaea for his vicennalia, "so the shift might not have been as abrupt as it now seems."
Two other factors to be considered is that the council of bishops probably lasted longer than Constantine had anticipated, and then the heat and humidity would have made travel more challenging in late July.
Nicaea was therefore convenient for the emperor and his bodyguard, and remaining there thus ensured "that not one of the bishops was missing from the imperial banquet" (Eusebius, Vit. Const. 15.1).
The palace was thus transformed from holding an ecclesiastical synod to hosting an imperial panegyris.
Eusebius describes how Constantine gave a farewell address to the bishops "when the Council (synodos) was finally about to dissolve" (Vit. Const. 3.21.2).

This address follows the vicennalia banquet in his narrative. Therefore, it seems the emperor expeditiously began the celebration where everyone was gathered rather than requiring an inconvenient transfer to Nicomedia. Following Constantine’s address, the bishops were dismissed to pass again through one of Nicaea’s four gates to return to their homes by land or by sea. Constantine himself departed with his retinue most probably across Lake Ascania, transiting the isthmus to Cius, and finally sailing back to Nicomedia to resume his residency there.

Conclusion
Local traffic in İznik today detours around the north, east, and south gates; only the dilapidated west gate to the lake remains part of a thoroughfare. Regional traffic bypasses the city altogether. The new toll road from İzmir to İstanbul does pass through Gemlik (Cius) and around the western end of İznik Lake (Ascania). Ironically this road crosses the Sea of Marmara on the new Ozmangazi Bridge from Hersek/Altınova (Helenopolis) to Gebze (Libyssa) at its narrowest point, once the crossing for the later Pilgrim’s Road. The main road to Ankara now runs east from İzmit to Bolu (Claudiopolis) before turning southeast to Turkey’s capital city. The main north-south route between İzmit and Eskişehir follows the Sakarya River valley 32 km east of İznik. Therefore, pilgrims to Nicaea today must take secondary roads to visit the city, which was once the crossroads of Christianity geographically but still is its center theologically, as the celebration of the 1,700th anniversary of the council in 2025 attests.

See (PDF) One If by Land, Two If by Sea Traveling to Nicaea for the Council of 325

Fontes Nicaenae Synodi aims to offer a complete collection of documents relating to the Council of Nicaea. These documents have three characteristics in common: 1) they were written in the period from the beginning of the Melitian crisis (304) to the death of Constantine (337); 2) they have a close relationship to the topics discussed at Nicaea, such as the Melitian crisis, the Arian controversy, disciplinary and liturgical issues; and 3) they have been handed down by indirect tradition. These features already reveal the novelty of the work, which, unlike Hans Georg Opitz's foundational work, Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites (Berlin 1934-1935), is not a collection of documents on the Arian crisis, but on the Nicene Council. The traditional view tended to identify Nicaea with the condemnation of Arianism, with the condemnation of Arianism and with the introduction of the controversial homoousios. This tendency is understandable because most of the documents concern the Arian controversy, and the consequences of this dispute were most relevant in the long run. However, the gradual maturation of studies makes it possible to take a step further by moving from a retrospective and selective look at Nicaea to a comprehensive historical survey of the documents: this is the purpose of Fontes Nicaenae Synodi. Consequently, the volume starts with the Melitian crisis (304), which broke out because of Diocletian's persecution. From the point of view of the Alexandrian episcopate, the persistence of this schism created a need to reabsorb centrifugal thrusts, which may help to explain the exacerbated ecclesial climate in which Alexander and Arius clashed. On the other hand, the volume ends with the death of Constantine (337), which marks the end of the first reception of Nicaea.

Fontes Nicaenae Synodi also suggests a method of study for the documents that concern the Arian crisis. This method draws the consequences of the long and deep path of historical revision that began with the work of Eduard Schwartz and Opitz, and of the current historiographical debate that is increasingly international and emancipated from ideological and apologetic assumptions at least as far as most scholars are concerned. The method consists of freeing the documents from the unnatural context in which they were transmitted polemic, apologetic, narrative to study them iuxta propria principia, placing them back at the precise moment in which they were composed and into their authors' motivations, which may also have been polemical and apologetic, but which, in any case, were their own, not of those who transmitted them. Let us not forget what was said at the beginning: the earliest documents of the Arian crisis – what Samuel Fernández, the editor of this valuable volume, calls “the third level” of primary sources – were transmitted in the indirect tradition by the protagonists of the controversy themselves, in primis Eusebius and Athanasius, and later historians, who represent the other two levels of sources. But the process of re-interpretation to which the documents are subjected because of their inclusion in later sources is not the only problem to be addressed. Often, their chronology is uncertain; in many cases, it can be established with good probability only through mutual comparison, as Fernández explains in the introduction.

Fontes Nicaenae Synodi is intended to be a working tool for scholars and students of Late Antiquity in the fields of history, theology, philosophy, and philology. For this reason, the editor, while relying on modern editions of the collected documents and resorting only exceptionally to manuscripts, has provided the reader with clear indications to the reference editions. Above all, in the case where a document is transmitted by different sources, the differences in the various textual traditions are pointed out. For example, the letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to his church, written immediately after the Council, is handed down by Athanasius, Socrates, and Theodoret, so the differences between the three textual transmissions of the letter are noted. This is a further value of the volume that deserves to be noted.

In conclusion, I think that there is no better way to commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea (325–2025) than to put the Council itself back in the center by presenting its documentation, finally collected in one volume.

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See [(PDF) Fontes Nicaenae Synodi: The Contemporary Sources for the Study of the Council of Nicaea (304–337)]

Natalia Smelova

The Canons of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in the Manuscript IOM, RAS Syr. 34

Abstract: The article deals with the manuscript IOM, RAS Syr. 34, one leaf of parchment originating from the collection of Nikolai Likhachev. It contains a Syriac translation of selected documents of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (AD 325): the introduction to the canons, a bilingual Greek-Syriac list of 42 bishops, and the first five canons of the council. Most of the texts are incomplete and damaged. The present article focuses mainly on the study and commented publication of the five Nicaean canons from IOM, RAS Syr. 34. On the basis of comparative textual research the author aims to show the place of the St. Petersburg manuscript in the history of Syriac translations of the canons.

Key words: Christian Church, Late Roman Empire, Ecumenical Councils, canon law, Syriac translations from Greek, Syriac manuscripts

Introduction

1. IOM, RAS Syr. 34: the study of provenance and paleographic description

The subject of this paper is a remarkable one-leaf parchment manuscript IOM, RAS Syr. 34, which contains fragmented documents of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (AD 325) (hereafter, Nicaea I): a final portion of the introduction to the canons (f. 1r), the bilingual Greek-Syriac list of 42 bishops (f. 1r), and the first five canons (incomplete and badly damaged) (f. 1v).

The manuscript came into the Institute as part of the collection of the historian Nikolai Likhachev (1862–1936). This remarkable private collection was formed in the course of the late 19th and early 20th cc. It included various types of script and writing material, both Eastern and Western, due to the collector’s special interest in the history of writing, paleography and codicology. In 1918, the nationalised collection became the basis for the newly-founded Cabinet of Paleography that first was part of the Archeological Institute, and then (since 1923) of the Archeological Museum of the Petrograd University. In 1925 it was renamed the Museum of Paleography and came under the administration of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR.

Later on, in 1930, following Likhachev's arrest, this was reorganised as the Museum of the Book, Document and Writing, which was soon afterwards renamed Institute and subsequently, in 1936, ceased its existence as an independent organisation. From 1930 until 1935 the collection was gradually distributed among different institutions in Leningrad, such as the State Hermitage Museum, the Leningrad Branches of the Institute of History and the Institute of Oriental Studies (now IOM) of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, depending on the language and nature of the material.

The scope, scale and significance of the collection could be fully appreciated at the exhibition held in the Hermitage in 2012, which brought together artefacts and manuscripts that once belonged to Likhachev and are now kept in different depositories in St. Petersburg.
Among the numerous Oriental materials from the Likhachev Collection, six items were identified as Syriac, in some cases by their script rather than by language.
The provenance of the manuscripts can be established, albeit only approximately, from the hand-written notes taken by Yurii Perepelkin of Likhachev's own statements, now in St. Petersburg Branch of the Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Regarding the manuscript later classified as Syr. 34, we know that it was acquired from an antiquarian bookseller in St. Petersburg around 1900 along with two others, the liturgy of John Chrysostom in the form of a paper scroll, and 53 loose leaves of parchment carrying the Homiliae Cathedrales by Severus of Antioch.
However, there is another piece of testimony provided by Heinrich Goussen who writes that most probably this is the same leaf of parchment which was offered to the University of Strasbourg by an antiquarian from Frankfurt around 1896/1897. Goussen saw and copied the manuscript himself and he tends to date it to the 7th–8th cc. Thus it well may be that Likhachev purchased the manuscript from an antiquarian bookeller in Frankfurt rather than St. Petersburg.
Apart from this information, we are fortunate to have further notes testifying to the time when our manuscript reached St. Petersburg and was first examined there. The manuscript is still kept in its original folder along with two handwritten notes in French dated 14th November 1859. These were made by two librarians of the Imperial Public Library (hereafter — IPL) in St. Petersburg, Eduard de Muralt and Bernhard (Boris) Dorn, who examined and provided an expert opinion on the two manuscripts, the Homiliae Cathedrales (now Syr. 35) and the Nicaean documents (now Syr. 34). Muralt describes the latter as containing the first five canons of the Council of Nicaea of AD 325 issued and subscribed by 318 bishops, of whom 41 (sic! — N.S.) signature survived in Greek writing of approximately the 9th–10th cc. and in Syriac esṭrangelo writing. He then lists the names of the bishops in French.
In Dorn's note the manuscript is described as being written in the "Nestorian" script and is dated, on the basis of paleography, to the 9th c. In October 1859 Constantine Tischendorf returned to St. Petersburg from his expedition to the Middle East and brought a collection of 109 Greek and Oriental manuscripts, predominately Christian, which was solemnly presented to the Tsar Alexander II, who had sponsored the expedition, and subsequently deposited in the IPL. Among Tischendorf's finds was the other portion of the Homiliae Cathedrales manuscript (23 leaves; now NLR, Syr. new series 10). We can only conjecture that the two manuscripts (IOM, RAS Syr. 34 and Syr. 35) might also have been brought to St. Petersburg by Tischendorf in 1859. However, it is unclear why, having been seen and described by Bernhard Dorn, the librarian at the IPL Manuscripts Department as well as the director of the Asiatic Museum, they were acquired neither by he IPL nor by the Museum. Probably, in 1859, they entered a private collection in Russia, from which they were sold to an antiquarian, either in St. Petersburg, or in Frankfurt, where they were eventually purchased by Likhachev at the turn of the 20th c.
The first scholarly description of the manuscript, the study and publication of the bilingual Greek and Syriac list of bishops was undertaken by Vladimir Beneshevich in the 1910s.
The researcher highlighted the bilinguality of the list as a feature which made the St. Petersburg manuscript unique, since no other examples were known to him at that time. He thoroughly analysed the Greek script used in the names of the bishops (majuscule form) as well as in the names of the provinces and marginal notes (transitional form with elements of minuscule), and came to the conclusion that the writing can be dated to the 8th(?)–9th cc. Quoting Prof. Pavel Kokovtsoff's opinion, he described the Syriac script as "a Jacobite cursive" of approximately 9th- 10th cc. In addition to this, Beneshevich stated that both parts of the list were written simultaneously, although the Greek and parallel Syriac column (the names of the bishops and provinces) could have been written by one scribe and the three columns of Syriac text by another hand.
Another significant conclusion drawn by Beneshevich was that the Syriac text of the

canons in the St. Petersburg manuscript is virtually the same recension as that in the manuscript Paris syr. 62 in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. He supposed that this translation of the Greek canons was made around the time of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, i.e. AD 451 (see the discussion on this text in chapter 2 below).

A short description of the IOM, RAS Syr. 34 was included in the “Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in Leningrad” by Nina Pigulevskaya.

Agreeing with Kokovtsoff’s opinion, she defined the script of the manuscript as a clear cursive in its transitional form from esṭrangelo to serṭo (the WestSyrian writing). She added also that the ductus is similar to that seen in the manuscript containing a work by Sahdona copied in AD 837 (AG 1148) by a monk called Sergius who donated it to the Monastery of Moses on Sinai (NLR Syr. new series 13; Strasbourg MS 4116).

This statement is somewhat unclear because the main text of the latter manuscript is written in esṭrangelo. Apparently, Pigulevskaya was referring to the cursive writing used in the colophon, which does make sense, although the two scripts are obviously not identical, as the Sahdona manuscript contains more elements of cursive than IOM, RAS Syr. 34.

The dimensions of the IOM, RAS Syr. 34 are 195×293 mm. The upper right corner of f. 1r is damaged, so that the final part of the introduction on the recto as well as the title and the initial part of the canons on the verso have been lost. The text on the hair (recto) side of the parchment is generally better preserved than the text on the flesh side, where it was rubbed or washed off. The text is written with iron gall ink, while the names of provinces in both Greek and Syriac (f. 1r) as well as the titles and numbers of the canons (f. 1v) are in red ink.

The recto contains two columns of text; the right-hand column and the text in the lower margin are further divided to include parallel lists of bishops in two languages. The left edge of the right-hand column is more or less observed, in contrast to the right edge which is virtually ignored. Thus it becomes obvious that the Greek names were written prior to the Syriac ones, which were fitted into the space available. The left column contains 42 lines of plain Syriac text of the so-called introduction to the canons. In the left margin, there are a few Greek words corresponding to those given in Syriac transcription in the introduction. Writing area: variable, 272×164 mm maximum; right column: variable, 272×88 mm maximum; left column: 224× 64 mm; upper margin — 20 mm; lower margin: filled with names of bishops and, in the bottom right corner, four lines of smaller Syriac text in a vertical direction published by Beneshevich; right margin: between 7 and 16 mm; left margin: up to 25 mm, gap between columns about 10 mm.

The verso contains two columns of Syriac text (42 lines in the right column, 41 in the left column) with Greek glosses in the right margin and in the gap between the columns. The traces of ruling include four pinholes marking the edges of the columns. Writing area: 224×150 mm; right column: 224×64 mm; left column: 224×67 mm; upper margin — up to 23 mm; lower margin — up to 48 mm; right margin — up to 30 mm; left margin — 17 mm; gap between columns 20 mm. Measurememts were taken from the pinholes.

The writing of the main Syriac text is a transitional form of esṭrangelo with some elements of serṭo□(□ □ □ □). The Syriac list of bishops is written in a rather cursive script with occasional elements of esṭrangelo (letters□ □ □ □). It is, however, unlikely that the two were written by different scribes, as Beneshevich suggested. Such ductus features as the slope of the letters and final strokes, especially, the final □, testify to the fact that both parts were written by the same hand. It is difficult to say whether the Greek text was executed by the same scribe. However, taking into account the high level of translation activity and the widespread use of Greek marginal notes in West-Syrian manuscripts, it would seem reasonable to assume that both texts were written by the same Syriac scribe well versed in the Greek language and calligraphy.

Although a similar transitional form of the script can be found in a number of 9th c. West-Syrian manuscripts (e.g. BL Add. 12159 of AD 867/868 and BL Add. 14623 of AD 823), it is also characteristic of some SyroMelkite manuscripts, presumed to be of the same period (e.g. Syr. Sp. 68, Syr. Sp. 70, 9th c., according to Sebastian Brock).

Therefore in our case the writing per se cannot be decisive in determining whether the manuscript belongs to one tradition or the other. However, the Greek words in the margins form part of the specifically West-Syrian system for the presentation of translated texts (cf. Greek scholia in IOM, RAS Syr. 35, BL Add. 17148 (AD 650–660), BL Add. 17134 (AD 675), BL Add. 12134 (AD 697) and many other West-Syrian manuscripts from the 7th c. onwards).

This latter feature as well as the recension of the text, which is only preserved in WestSyrian manuscripts, may testify to the West-Syrian origin of the St. Petersburg leaf.

2. Documents of Nicaea I in Syriac translation: an overview

Paraphrasing Michel Aubineau, the question of the exact number of bishops who participated in the Council of Nicaea is likely to remain for ever insoluble.
Even the 4th c. writers, who attended the council, do not agree on this matter. The Vita Constantini, ascribed, although not without some doubt, to Eusebius, gives the smallest number, to wit “more than two hundred and fifty bishops”.
Theodoret, quoting the words of Eustathius of Antioch, who chaired the council before his deposition and exile, mentions about 270 bishops.
Other sources give a number around or above 300.
These are the letter from Emperor Constantine to the Church of Alexandria (AD 325) quoted by Socrates Scholasticus, Gelasius of Cyzicus and others; Apologia contra Arianos (AD 350-351) and Historia Arianorum ad monachos (AD 358) by Athanasius; Altercatio Luciferiani et Orthodoxi by Jerome, etc.
However, at some point in the 4th c., the precise number of 318 bishops emerged and gained currency, being associated with the number of Abraham’s servants in Gen. 14:14.
Among the earliest sources which give the number 318, scholars mention De Fide ad Gratianum by Ambrose, Epistola ad Afros by Athanasius, De synodis and Liber contra Constantium imperatorem by Hilary of Poitiers.

I should add that the tradition does not always specify whether 318 refers to the total number of bishops gathered in Nicaea or to those who signed the canons and other resolutions of the council (some bishops were deposed in the course of the sessions and sent into exile before the end of the council; others refused to put their signatures to the Creed).
In either case, the number 318 became widely reflected in the title of the Nicaean canons in Syriac translations (e.g. BL Add. 14528, BL Add. 14526, BL Add. 14529, and also the 72 pseudo-Nicaean canons associated with Maruta of Maiperqaṭ) as well as in some later Greek versions of the list of bishops.
The written records of Nicaea I have not survived unlike the acts of the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (AD 431) and all subsequent Ecumenical Councils. The main resolutions concerning Church structure and internal discipline, including issues of private life and ordination of priests and bishops, were formulated in the form of 20 canons. Karl Joseph Hefele in his Conciliengeschichte made a thorough study of the question of the number of the Nicaean canons. On the one hand, he cites Theodoret, Gelasius of Cyzicus, Rufinus and other Church historians who spoke of 20 canons, and mentions numerous western (Latin) and eastern (Greek and Slavonic) medieval canonic manuscripts (Syntagmas, Nomocanons and other collections of canon law) containing 20 Nicaean canons. On the other hand, he shows some Arabic versions which preserved up to 84 canons ascribed to the Council of Nicaea. First published in the course of the 16th c. by the Jesuits François Torrès and Alphonse Pisani, then re-published in mid- 17th c. by the Maronite Abraham Ecchelensis, the Latin translation of these was included in all major collections of the proceedings of the Ecumenical Councils
Hefele sums up the conclusions of various scholars that these additional canons were products of later Eastern traditions. Some of them could not have been composed before the Council of Ephesus (431), others not before Chalcedon (461).
In 1898, the publication by Oscar Braun made known the corpus of works ascribed to Maruta, Bishop of Maiperqaṭ, on the basis of the East-Syrian manuscript from the former Borgia Museum in Vatican, now Borg. sir. 82. Among a dozen works dealing with the Council of Nicaea, he published a transcription of 73 Syriac “Nicaean” canons. The scholarly publication of these texts was undertaken by Arthur Vööbus.
As follows from the title, the canons of the council of 318 [bishops] were translated by Maruta at the request of Mar Isḥaq, Bishop-Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.
In AD 410 Maruta assisted Mar Isḥaq in convening the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. That synod was an important milestone in the formation of the Church structure within the Sasanian Empire. In order to stress its legitimate status and continuity from the Ecumenical Church, the Synod accepted the main resolutions of Nicaea I, including the Creed and the canons.
On the occasion of the synod, Maruta apparently translated from Greek the main documents of the Council of Nicaea, including 20 canons, the Creed, the Sacra, letters of Constantine and Helena and the names of the bishops (220 in number, without the Western bishops) and also composed his own overview of the Canon of Nicaea and various related explanatory pieces, i.e. on monasticism, persecutions, heresies, on terms, ranks and orders, etc. All these texts were included in the edition prepared by Vööbus on the basis of the manuscript from the Monastery of Our Lady of the Seeds in Alqoš (Alqoš 169; later in the Chaldean monastery in Bagdad, No.

509) with variants from Vat. sir. 501, Borg. sir. 82, Mingana Syr. 586, and Mingana Syr. 47 (see details of some of these manuscripts in Table 1 below).

Braun considered Maruta to be the author of the 73 canons originally composed in Syriac.

Vööbus neither supports nor rejects this attribution due to the lack of evidence, as well as the critical edition and stylistic analysis of the text.

Moreover, he adds that the East-Syrian recension, which associates the canons with Maruta, is not the original one and must have been adopted from the West-Syrian tradition. He also mentions Arabic and Ethiopic versions of these canons.

In a number of Syriac manuscripts the authentic Nicaean canons are accompanied by the list of bishops who approved and signed them (the list can be included either before or after the canons). Being originally a collection of signatures in Greek, the list underwent certain transformations within the Greek tradition and was subsequently translated into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Armenian.

Among the variety of versions Dmitrii Lebedev distinguished two forms of the list. In “systematic” lists, which include all extant Latin, Syriac, Coptic and Armenian versions, the names are arranged according to provinces. The “non-systematic” lists published by Gelzer, Hilgenfeld and Cuntz from selected Greek and Arabic manuscripts lack the names of the provinces and arrange the bishops’ names in a different, somewhat peculiar, way.

All Syriac lists, which can be found in both West-Syrian and East-Syrian manuscripts, are in the “systematic” form and derive from the Greek recension of Theodoros Anagnostes (the list of 212 names, originally included in Socrates Scholasticus’s Historia Ecclesiastica).

Besides anonymous collections of ecclesiastical law, the lists are included in the Chronicle of the 12 th -c. Syrian Orthodox patriarch Michael the Great and the Nomocanon of ‘Abdišo‘ bar Brika, the Metropolitan of Nisibis (Church of the East) (13th–14th cc.). According to Vladimir Beneshevich, the version of the list in the manuscript IOM, RAS Syr. 34 corresponds to the West-Syrian recension used by Michael the Great in his Chronicle (VII:2).

This perfectly supports our assumption regarding the West-Syrian origin of the St. Petersburg manuscript. Beneshevich also states that the original Greek version of the Syriac list must have been composed after 371 under a certain influence from theCoptic tradition. It also became the source for the Latin translations.

Another curious observation by Beneshevich about the Greek text of the list in IOM, RAS Syr. 34 is that it represents a transcription of the Syriac forms of the names of provinces and bishops rather than being the authentic Greek forms.

However, Hubert Kaufhold demonstrates that this is not particularly correct and the scribe must have had the original list of bishops before his eyes. The fact that the Greek names of the provinces are in the nominative rather than the genitive is not decisive here, as some Greek and Syriac forms in this recension (which can be fully evaluated on the grounds of Mardin Orth. 309) are clearly different (e.g. ΕΔΕΣΗΣ — □□□□□).

Beneshevich wrote his work in the first decades of the 20th c. when no other manuscripts containing bilingual lists of bishops were known. Thus the St. Petersburg leaf was considered unique. However, due to new acquisitions made by the Vatican Library and Arthur Vööbus’s exploration of Middle Eastern manuscript collections, some other bilingual Greek-Syriac lists have become known, among them the 8th-c. codex Mardin Orth. 309 and Vat. sir. 495, a 20th c. manuscript “copied from an ancient codex”.

The Mardin manuscript attracted a lot of attention, particularly, from Hubert Kaufhold who published the lists of bishops of the early Greek councils and synods on its basis.

Alongside the above-mentioned 20 canons and the list of bishops, the Nicaean documents in both West-Syrian and East-Syrian manuscripts, mostly of legislative contents, include the Nicaean Creed, the letter of Constantine of AD 325 calling on the bishops who assembled in Ancyra to move to the new venue in Nicaea, the Sacra, i.e. the decree of Constantine against the Arians; the letter of the bishops to the Church of Alexandria, and an introduction to the canons.

This last work has not yet been fully identified. According to Vladimir Beneshevich, it may be a combination of two different texts: the afterword to the Nicaean Creed included in Gelasius’s Historia Ecclesiastica (II:27), also known in Latin, Coptic and Armenian translations, and the council’s resolution on the celebration of Easter. This text in Syriac translation was thought to be present in full in the manuscript Paris syr. 62 only. However, it can be also identified in the two Mardin manuscripts discovered by Arthur Vööbus, Mardin Orth. 309 and Mardin Orth. 310, as well as the Birmingham manuscript Mingana Syr. 8 that was copied in 1911 from the fragmented Mardin Orth. 310.

3. The place of IOM, RAS Syr. 34 in the textual history of the Syriac canons of Nicaea I

We are indebted to Friedrich Schulthess for the initial identification of different Syriac translations and recensions of the canons of Nicaea I. Through a critical study of eight Syriac manuscripts, he uncovered the fact that the canons were translated twice. One translation (A) is attested by the London codex BL Add. 14528 of the 6th c. The first of its two independent parts that were bound together is an archaic form of Synodicon of the councils from Nicaea to Chalcedon with the exception of the Council of Ephesus (ff. 1–151). This form of canonical collection is known as the “Corpus canonum” and is thought to have been compiled in Antioch shortly before the Council of Constantinople (381). It included the canons of the Greek councils and synods of the 4th c. (Nicaea, Ancyra, Neocaesarea, Gangra, Antioch, Laodiceia and Constantinople itself) with later added canons of the Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon.

It represents the core and the initial part of subsequent Synodica, i.e. the corpora of ecclesiastical legislation, both West-Syrian (e.g. Paris syr. 62, Damascus 8/11) and East Syrian (e.g. Alqoš 169 and its copies).

The colophon of Add. 14528 informs us that the entire collection of 193 canons of various synods was translated from Greek into Syriac in Mabbug in the year 500/501 (AD 812).

Schulthess described this translation as precise, and Vööbus suggested that it was the later of the two. He states that translation A (hereafter, I use Schulthess’s letters indicating the published manuscripts as a designation of translations contained in them) was intended to correct and improve the existing rendering which permitted certain leeway in the interpretation of Greek canon law.

The manuscript BL Add. 14528 is also interesting as it contains a very well preserved Syriac list of the bishops at Nicaea I which became the basis for a number of modern publications (see Table 1 for details).

The beginning of the 6th c. was the time when Philoxenus, a strong advocate of Miaphysitism, was active in Mabbug, where he was a bishop from 485 until his deposition in 519. In all probability, the translation of the canons made in Mabbug in 501 (as is claimed in the colophon of Add. 14528) was the result of a large-scale translation activity, which consisted primarily in the translation of the Old and New Testament, commissioned by Philoxenus and performed by his horepiskopus Polycarpus.

Hubert Kaufhold adds an interesting detail: another Miaphysite leader, Severus, Patriarch of Antioch (512–518), mentions in his letters a collection of canons of the imperial councils which was available to him, although no Greek original for this existed at his time.

This may have been the translation produced in Mabbug just a decade before his patriarchate.

In this case, why were the canons of the hostile Council of Chalcedon translated and included in all known West-Syrian manuscripts of purely legislative or mixed contents (e.g. BL Add. 14526, BL Add. 14529, BL Add. 12155, Paris syr. 62, Damascus Part. 8/11 etc.)? The answer is probably that they cover and discuss disciplinary rather than doctrinal issues, so their inclusion in the West-Syrian collections would not give rise to any further controversy. By contrast, the canon(s) of Ephesus seems to be a rarer text. Most West-Syrian manuscripts studied by Schulthess and Vööbus include only one canon of Ephesus (namely, canon 7, dealing with the Nicaean Creed) of eight known in the Greek tradition (with the exception of Paris syr. 62 which includes two canons, 8 and 7). They are not included in the East-Syrian Synodicon Borg. sir. 82, although that codex is highly fragmented. The canons of Ephesus are quite different in content as, unlike those of other councils, they have a pronouncedly polemical character.

The earliest evidence of another translation (B), which Schulthess characterises as “free”, is the manuscript BL Add. 14526 from the 7th c. It was probably written around or soon after 641.

Like the previous manuscript, the first part of this composite codex contains the Corpus canonum, including one canon of the Council of Ephesus. Despite the evidence for this translation being more recent than the previous one, Vööbus points out its archaic character and suggests that this might be the first attempt at interpreting the canons.

The further development of both translations of the Nicaean canons is most curious. Translation A emerges in East-Syrian manuscripts which contain the works of Maruta of Maiperqaṭ (Borg. sir. 82, Vat. Syr. 501, Mingana Syr. 586, Mingana Syr. 47). This creates a certain difficulty, as the colophons in the manuscripts contradict each other. Was the Nicaean corpus translated by Maruta on the occasion of the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410 (as East-Syrian manuscripts claim) or were the canons of Nicaea translated together with those constituting the Antiochian Corpus canonum around 501 in Mabbug? This question can only be answered on the basis of comparative stylistic analysis of translation A with the texts ascribed to Maruta on the one hand and with the West-Syrian translations from the 6th c. on the other.

Interestingly, other examples of translation A can be found in manuscripts with mixed contents of undoubtedly West-Syrian origin: the polemic florilegium BL Add. 14529 (7th–8th cc.) which includes patristic texts against heretics such as Nestorius and Julian of Halicarnassus; and a highly fragmented 8th–9th cc. codex in the Houghton Library of Harvard University that came from the collection of James Rendel Harris, which also contains apocryphal gospels and apocalypses.

The comparison of the different patterns of translation A show minor variants (with the exception of the general title of the canons) and testify to roughly the same recension of the text.

Translation B, on the contrary, underwent some major alterations in the course of its textual history, probably due to the free character of the original translation, which was considered unsatisfactory at some point. The first recension (C-D) of this translation is attested by West-Syrian manuscripts with various contents, e.g. BL Add. 12155 (C) (8th c.), a very extensive polemic florilegium, and Vat. sir. 127 (D), a collection of canons similar in structure to the earlier manuscript BL Add. 14526.

In the course of the exploration of Syriac manuscripts in the Middle East, Arthur Vööbus discovered in the library of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate in Damascus an important codex that was a compendium of the ecclesiastical law, the Synodicon, belonging to the West-Syrian tradition.

According to Vööbus, the version of the Nicaean canons preserved in this manuscript conforms in general to the C-D recension, although it adds a number of variants not attested by any previously known manuscripts.

Vööbus identified another example of the same recension in the manuscript Mardin Orth. 320.

Another recension (E), the result of further revision of the C-D text, was identified by Schulthess in the 9th-c. manuscript Paris syr. 62, a WestSyrian collection of apocryphal, patristic and canonical texts. An interesting feature is that this compendium of undoubtedly West-Syrian origin contains the previously mentioned 73 pseudo-Nicaean canons associated with Maruta of Maiperqaṭ. Apart from the 20 authentic canons of Nicaea I, the manuscript includes the introduction to the canons which also can be found in all other manuscripts attesting to this recension.

Arthur Vööbus and, later, Hubert Kaufhold identified the same revision of the text in two 8th-c. Synodica from the Za‘faran Monastery, namely, Mardin Orth. 309 and Mardin Orth. 310. With regard to the latter, Vööbus mentions a number of variants which “throw more light” on the history of this recension.

The copy of Mardin Orth. 310 is a manuscript of 1911 in the Mingana collection at the University of Birmingham, Mingana Syr. 8. Unlike Schulthess, Kaufhold identifies this version as the second translation (or, rather an adaptation of the first translation) of the canons made by Jacob of Edessa at the end of the 7th c.

Within the context of comparative textual study of the translations of the Nicaean canons and, in particular, the recension E just mentioned, the main perspective is the preparation of the critical edition of the 20 Nicaean canons and an introduction to the canons through study and collation of the manuscripts Mardin Orth. 309, Mardin Orth. 310, IOM, RAS Syr. 34, Paris syr. 62 and Mingana Syr. 8. There is still a possibility that at some point the manuscript, presumably from the 9th c., to which our leaf originally belonged to, will be found.

See (55) The Canons of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in the Manuscript IOM, RAS Syr. 34, in Written Monuments of the Orient (English version), 1(3), 2016. P. 35-63.

Tempus destruendi et tempus aedificandi (Eccl 3:3). The historiography of the Council of Nicaea was dominated for a long time by the retrospective “master narrative” established by Athanasius and developed by the ancient Christian historians and heresiologists. In contrast, during recent centuries it has been shaped by the deconstruction of this narrative in light of critical studies. Williams points to Newman as the initiator of modern scholarship on Nicaea (1833); however, the critical spirit was not absent from earlier editors and historians, such as Henri de Valois (+1676) and Bernard de Montfaucon (+1741). In any case, as far as the sources are concerned, the works of Schwartz and Opitz undoubtedly marked a milestone (1934). The Urkunden, freed from the polemical or apologetic context in which they were transmitted, allowed a new understanding of the sources and prompted a necessary process of deconstruction of the master narrative, tempus destruendi. This process has been neither linear nor homogeneous because abandoning the persistent hermeneutical biases imposed by the master narrative is a difficult task.

Moreover, wrong ways of integrating confessional premises into historical studies have hindered this process. However, the works of authors such as Bardy, Simonetti, and Hanson have made enormous steps in rewriting the history of the Council of Nicaea.

Recent studies have shown the extent to which “Arianism” is a polemical construction. This is an achievement that scholarship cannot waive. Yet, at times, the idea of “construction” has been misunderstood, as if it indicates a narrative that is nothing more than the fruit of polemical imagination and, therefore, an object of pure deconstruction, tempus destruendi. Of course, for example, Alexander transmitted a construction of Arianism; however, the task of scholars should not just be to “deconstruct” ancient “constructions,” but also to identify and “reconstruct” the historical elements that explain the shape of such a construction. What did Alexander see in the clerics whom he criticized that moved him to construct such an “Arianism”? Ancient accounts were not usually created ex nihilo. Therefore, a programmatic distrust of ancient sources can be just as uncritical as a naive trust in them. It is not that academic studies should be less critical; they must be more critical! Scholars should critically assess their own distrust of sources and their models of understanding. Indeed, it is impossible to grasp the complexity of reality with out such models. For this reason, human knowledge, including scientific works, is a kind of construction. Consequently, scholars must critically reevaluate both ancient models of interpretation and their own.

INTRODUCTION

Something similar could be said about the factors that shape history. According to the “master narrative,” the ultimate driving force behind the controversy was the fight of heresy against orthodoxy. According to this view, the Arians alleged many reasons for attacking Athanasius, but the real reason behind all their claims and actions was their hatred of orthodoxy. Their sole purpose was to introduce impiety into the Church (ἀσέβειαν είς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν εἰσαγάγωσι).[1] In contrast, some modern studies have regarded doctrinal causes with suspicion and have disclosed to what extent Christian controversies were shaped not only by theology, but also by politics, power, local identities, and other factors. Again, this is an accomplishment that academic works cannot neglect. However, scientific studies should also critically assess the assumption that theological reasons are always a pretext that hides other unconfessed motivations. In short, critical scholars must be self-critical as well. Tempus destruendi et tempus aedificandi.

An open and honest dialog between the scholar’s preconceptions and the evidence is crucial. Without this dialog, scholars risk projecting into the ancient world our modern categories, to the point of distrusting systematically the dynamics that are unfamiliar to our current way of thinking. It is not critical to replace ancient beliefs with modern beliefs. A self-critical assessment of our own assumptions allows us to hear the sources and to get in contact with the richness of what is unfamiliar to us.

This dialog is complex because it is not possible to approach historical evidence without a preexisting theoretical model and certain presuppositions.

A model is necessary to grasp reality. However, it implies some risks. A theoretical framework must always be provisional. A fitting model is one that can grasp reality and is helpful for making sense of seemingly unrelated historical data. In the same vein, a suitable working hypothesis is one that solves more problems than it causes. Instead, a theoretical framework could become an obstacle for grasping reality, when it is not open to welcome the anomalies of ancient sources. Models are a working tool and, therefore, they should be tentative and provisional.

Theories must fit reality, and not vice-versa. Scholars who are open to bearing the mismatch between the model and the historical evidence can learn from the sources. Otherwise, scholars risk projecting their presuppositions onto ancient sources. Let me recall a classic example. All the textual evidence - Greek and Latin - supports that Arius, in his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, declared that the Son is “fully God” (πλήρης θεός).

However, as the theoretical framework established that Arius denied the Son’s divinity, instead of rethink ing the framework, the editors amended the text. Of course, it is not easy to deal with these anomalies that witness the unexpected; however, this uncomfortable mismatch puts the scholar on the edge of knowledge.

This example shows, in addition, that conceptual models impact not only doctrinal interpretation of sources, but also the scientific edition of their texts. The philological and hermeneutical stages are not strictly successive; they also influence one another. Even those who work directly with manuscripts are somehow guided by theoretical presuppositions. Again, critical scholars must be self-critics as well.

The 1,700th anniversary of Nicaea offers a precious opportunity, that is, a καιρός, to take a step forward and revisit this event. Two main reasons foster this task. First, standard works on Nicaea focus on the so-called Arian controversy rather than the synod itself and pay more attention to its reception than to the event. Second, studies on the synod have not always applied the method that scholars of the 20th century have developed. In addition, thanks to the efforts of the Athanasius Werke, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller, Sources chrétiennes, and other series, almost all the sources appear in a scientific edition. Accordingly, the present book has two main purposes: 1) to focus on the Council of Nicaea itself, rather than its reception, and 2) to apply a ratio interpretandi that observes the hierarchy of the sources and, therefore, gives effective priority to contemporary sources over retrospective accounts.

1) The book focuses on Nicaea, and not exclusively on the "Arian" crisis; there fore, it intends to address the various topics that the synod tackled. Accordingly, on the one hand, the book should not begin with the outbreak of the theological crisis – the most significant topic of the synod, but not the only one. On the other hand, it is necessary to trace in the second and third centuries some disciplinary issues addressed by the canons and the letters of Nicaea. Therefore, the book includes a first chapter that deals with the institutional and theological antecedents, including the development of synodal activity before Nicaea, the relationship between the episcopate and the school in Alexandria, the Melitian crisis, the date of Easter, and the Trinitarian discussions that preceded and shaped the debate addressed by the Council of Nicaea. The following chapters present in a chronological way the steps of the events related to the synod, from the outbreak of the "Arian" controversy to the end of the first phase of the reception of the Nicene synod. As is explained in chapter 5, the death of Constantine is regarded as the end of the first step of the reception of the council.

2) The first comprehensive historical account of Nicaea is found in the historical, apologetic and polemical writings of Athanasius of Alexandria, a participant in the events. He reported the history according to his own perspective as a staunch adversary of Arius and a firm supporter of Nicaea. Although his long career was controversial, his literary activity, travels, political skills and other factors secured his reputation. Less than ten years after his death, Gregory of Nazianzus compared him with Christ (or. 21.29,3).

Thus, from the beginning, Athanasius' historical writings were backed by his personal reputation as a saint. Hence, almost all Christian authors have adopted his narrative. Indeed, Church historians and heresiologists of the 4th and 5th centuries, such as Epiphanius, Gelasius, Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret, transmitted Athanasius' black-and-white picture of the controversy. In the West, Rufinus, Sulpicius, and Cassiodorus adopted the same narrative. Only Hilary of Poitiers provided a quite independent perspective, but it had much less influence than that of Athanasius. Therefore, the Athanasian account became the "master narrative."[5] Only Philostorgius challenged the already official narrative, yet the imperial reaction against his perspective resulted in his work being lost; only some fragments were preserved. Thus, Athanasius became the indisputable hallmark of Nicene orthodoxy and Arius the arch-heretic: "No other heretic has been through so thoroughgoing a process of demonization."[6] This process has had lasting hermeneutical consequences because it produces strong prejudices in ancient and modern readers of the original sources. Accordingly, ancient Christian writers developed, expanded, supplemented and, at times, disputed this narrative, but always within the framework established by Athanasius. This situation gives rise to a hermeneutic challenge. Roughly speaking, scholars who want to reconstruct the controversy are in a trap. On the one hand, they need Athanasius as a source; on the other, they need to be free from Athanasius' interpretation. Is it possible to escape this trap? Fortunately, there is a way-out: modern scholarship has recognized that ancient sources transmit material that has varying degrees of reliability.

In general terms, it is possible to distinguish three layers or levels in the primary sources: the narratives of the historians, the testimonies of the protagonists, and the documents contemporary to the events. The last category of sources does not rely on the Athanasian account.

1) The narratives are the most immediate level of the historical works that describe the controversies of the fourth century. They are accounts written by Christian authors of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, who did not participate in the events they narrate and who shaped their works within the Athanasian framework. They are mainly Gelasius, Epiphanius, Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, Philostorgius, and Sulpicius. These authors produced their histories based on written sources. The problem with these narratives lies in the difficulty of distinguishing between what the ancient historians read in the sources and what they elaborated as authors influenced by the Athanasian account.

2) The second level is that of the testimonies, which are historical accounts of the controversies written some years after the events – with a retrospective viewpoint –

by authors who participated in these events. For the period under study (ca. 304-337), these authors are mainly Eusebius and Athanasius.

As they participated in the controversies, they are privileged witnesses. However, the time elapsed between the events and their writings, on the one hand, and their engagement in the controversy, on the other, led them to interpret the events retrospectively and biasedly. Thus, alongside the evidence, their accounts offer a retrospective and one-sided interpretation of the conflicts. Therefore, to assess the historical worth of these testimonies, it is necessary to consider the perspective of each of these authors.

3) The most valuable texts are the documents contemporary to the events, which are transmitted by ancient Christian writers. They are letters, creeds, canons, theological statements, and imperial reports. They have been transmitted as quotations, i.e., they are preserved in other works (traditio indirecta). The main authors transmitting documents are Eusebius, Athanasius, Hilary, Epiphanius, and the ancient Church historians. These documents are not free of bias because their authors were engaged in controversies. However, because they are contemporary to the events, they do not convey a retrospective view of the facts, nor are they influenced by Athanasius' account.

These controversial documents have been transmitted by works that are not neutral, and therefore it is necessary to free them from the polemical or apologetic framework in which they are embedded. This is the task undertaken by Fontes Nicaenae Synodi (FNS), the "partner book" that contains the text and translation of the contemporary documents.

The methodology guiding this research consists of 1) distinguishing the different layers of sources, narratives, testimonies, and documents, 2) giving effective hermeneutical priority to the documents over retrospective testimonies and narratives, 3) freeing the documents from the polemical framework in which they are embedded, and 4) relocating them in their original context.

In this way, they can be interpreted iuxta propria principia. Of course, the setting of each document, and especially its chronology, is a debatable matter (Ch. 2.1).

These methodological steps belong to traditional historicalphilological analysis of ancient sources. The novelty of this research - if any - is the systematicity with which these steps are applied. This approach implies that, for each period, the first reconstruction must be shaped by the analysis of the contemporary documents; then, this provisional reconstruction is complemented and confronted with ancient Christian historians and modern studies. The exception is chapter 2.3, where the period is reconstructed, as an example, taking into account the retrospective testimonies and narratives (master narrative), and then this reconstruction is confronted with the analysis of the contemporary documents in order to contrast the two narratives.

The "master narrative" describes Nicaea as a struggle between individuals moved by hatred, faith, jealousy and loyalty. The envy of the devil plays a crucial role in the events, and the participants are moved by theological reasons, namely, hatred of orthodoxy or heresy. Modern scholars, however, have shown that, alongside theology (and philosophy), politics also played a significant role in the crisis. The "Arian" crisis, though, was not only an intellectual and political struggle between individuals but also - and largely - a group conflict. The controversy, then, has been analyzed through the lenses of theology, philosophy, and politics, but the approach of the social sciences has been somehow neglected. Indeed, only particular aspects of the crisis have been studied using this perspective.7 However, it is not possible to explain a group phenomenon only in terms of theology, philosophy, politics, and individual behavior. Hence, to address the group dimension of the controversies, this research applies - when it is needed - an appropriate social-scientific theory to study the Arian crisis, namely, the social identity theory.

The fragmentary state of the ancient sources and their - at times - frustrating scarcity imply that any reconstruction of the Nicene Council cannot but be hypothetical. As the evidence allows different levels of certainty, the tenor of the phrases intends to point out the degree of certainty for each assertion.

Unless otherwise indicated translations are my own. Some elements of chapters 2 and 4 have appeared in previous articles, as stated in the footnotes.

However, these materials have been thoroughly reconsidered and reworked.

See Nicaea_325_Reassessing_the_Contemporary.pdf