Like the “short papers” at the Oxford Patristics Conference, I plan to limit my remarks today to 15 minutes. I will present the main contours of my ideas, and whoever wants to dig deeper may see the full paper with footnotes on my website: bryanlitfin.com, forward slash, Academics, in the Scholarly Work section. This should preserve some time for discussion, since I’d like to hear from the experts in the room about the two presentations today.

Everyone agrees that the basilica whose ruins lie under Lake Iznik dates to the late fourth or early fifth century.[1] I suggest that Emperor Theodosius’s support for Nicene orthodoxy after his *Cunctos Populos* edict of 380 would have been the perfect time to endow the construction of a memorial basilica in Nicaea. Or, if the emperor wasn’t a direct patron, some local Christian philanthropist who understood the way the winds were blowing could have been responsible. In any case, a late fourth-century date for the Underwater Basilica makes a lot of sense.

But the question that has interested scholars is, “What was there before?” Perhaps that is always an object of archaeological curiosity, but it becomes especially relevant when we reframe the questions as, “What was there, on that spot, in the summer of AD 325?” In other words, do the recently-discovered ruins in the lake mark a site that could have hosted Nicene council sessions?

Two theories have been offered about what was there before: a pagan temple of Apollo, or a pre-existing wooden church. Today, I will dispute each of those theories, then offer an alternative suggestion for what might have occupied the land where the ruins now poke through the waters of Lake Iznik.

Turkish professor Mustafa Şahin has proposed the Apollo Temple theory. For example, a PBS special which aired in October 2023 featured a segment in which he traveled to Oxford and met with Professor Dominik Maschek, whose 3D computer modeling showed the basilica superimposed onto the form of a smaller pagan temple.[2] Dr. Şahin considers it to have been an Apollo temple because we have evidence that in the second century, Emperor Commodus ordered the construction of a temple to this god somewhere outside the city walls at Nicaea. However, the only source for this is an eighth-century Byzantine text which might not have been an accurate record.[3]

I wondered if the Apollo Temple theory was tenuous in Dr. Şahin's mind, possibly overturned by the absence of actual temple foundations being discovered at the excavation site. Broken pieces of decorative marble do not prove that a temple once stood there, since *spolia* from elsewhere could have been used. But when Dr. Şahin graciously traveled to Iznik and met with a group of my students last May, he continued to advance this theory with conviction. He spoke about Constantine's supposed sun worship as a reason to believe in a connection to a solar deity like Apollo.[4]

Dr. Fairchild, on the other hand, does not believe this theory is correct. I am inclined to agree. The subject of temple conversions into churches in Asia Minor has been well covered by a series of scholars, all of whom agree that reuse as a church was a haphazard process that was by no means the normal fate for a defunct pagan temple.[5] Certainly, a "direct conversion" in which a temple with its fabric intact begins to serve as a church, as pictured in the Oxford professor's 3D modeling, wasn't happening until the late fifth century at the earliest.[6]

Admittedly, some "indirect conversions" were beginning to occur at the time the Underwater Basilica was erected. An "indirect conversion" refers to EITHER the construction of a church inside the *temenos* or sacred precinct of a temple, OR the demolition of the temple and reuse of its elements elsewhere for a new church. But these are not what Dr. Şahin is proposing. He thinks an Apollo temple stood on the spot where the church went up. He told me during our visit that certain wooden pieces discovered at the site were probably storerooms adjacent to the temple. But as I have just said, a "direct conversion" like this would be too early for this building by multiple decades.

Furthermore, direct conversions were always large, civic churches near the population centers. The Temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias is a major example, as is the Red Hall at Pergamon and the Artemision at Ephesus. The purpose of the conversion was partly practical: to provide easily accessible worship space to a growing urban congregation. No doubt there were also propaganda motives as Christianity displayed its victory over paganism by appropriating its monumental architecture. But this doesn't fit with the idea that a small, extra-mural temple of Apollo would be turned into a martyrion for commemorative devotion to a saint.[7] As far as I know, there are no examples of temple conversions into churches of this kind, whether in Asia Minor or anywhere else. A Christian necropolis would not be intentionally installed into the contaminated ground of a demonic pagan temple. And apart from the theological aversion to this, there's no in-ground evidence of that happening. Two separate Turkish teams who were investigating the seismic causes of the basilica's destruction reported that the building was constructed directly upon virgin beach-rock, with no intervening foundation discovered.[8] The Apollo Temple theory appears to have fatal flaws.

This brings us to the Wooden Church theory: that a wooden basilica existed on the site, but because of its transient construction material, no evidence of it remains. The theory is intriguing to Christian believers because the existence of a building in 325 would have provided roofed space for the Nicene council sessions to meet. The Underwater Basilica would be "where it all happened."[9] But I discount this theory for the following four reasons, which I will state succinctly before suggesting an alternative for what might have stood on the site.

First: the politics of the Tetrarchy in the years immediately prior to 325 would not have allowed the building of a new church. The Edict of Milan in 313 wasn't the overnight deliverance it is sometimes made out to be.[10] Though Constantine and Licinius played nice for the wedding at Milan, the new brothers-in-law were soon back to their fighting—and Licinius resumed persecuting Christians in his territories, which included Asia Minor.[11] There was no "peace of the church" for the citizens of Nicaea until 324. One Asian bishop, Paul of Neocaesarea, famously showed up at the council with maimed hands because of the "frantic rage of Licinius."[12] The emperor decreed that all Christians had to meet outside the city walls *in the open air*. How could the Christian community of Nicaea, only 36 miles from Licinius's capital of Nicomedia, be actively building a suburban church while their fellow believers across the eastern empire were being persecuted? It was politically impossible. No church could have been built at the Underwater Basilica site in time for the council.

Second: what in the world is a "wooden basilica"? Basilicas, whether secular or Christian, were always built of brick and stonework. They could *use* timber of course, mainly for roofs, along with doors, galleries, and furniture. But their walls and foundations were made of masonry that would have left remains. One searches in vain for any examples of entirely

wooden churches in Richard Krautheimer's exhaustive and still-authoritative catalog of early Byzantine architecture. He notes that upon the high plateau of Asia Minor, churches were normally constructed of local stone. "All were vaulted throughout," he says, "wood being *forever unobtainable*."[13] He even mentions a quote from Gregory of Nyssa, who explained the extensive use of stone vaulting for roofs in Asia Minor with the remark, "Since in our part of the world we have no timber, we will have to vault the octagonal chapel."[14] Another expert on churches in Turkey corroborates this when he remarks, "Local limestone is almost invariably the chosen building material."[15] I can't wrap my mind around the idea of an entirely wooden church at Nicaea.

Third: a small, extra-mural martyrion would not have been a grand enough location for the emperor's council. From the outset, this event was envisioned as μεγάλη or "magnificent."[16] Because Nicaea had an imperial mint that served the capital of Nicomedia, it would have had a palace complex that included reception halls and a royal residence. Eusebius's account of the Nicene council depicts its venue as grandiose.[17] Wearing full regalia, the emperor opened the proceedings "in the *very innermost hall of the palace*, which appeared to exceed the rest in size."[18] Clearly, there were other rooms in the complex, one of which was a probably a rotunda.[19] But when a gathering of all the attendees was required, only the largest rectangular audience hall with tiers running along its sides would suffice.[20] No building outside the palace complex was mentioned, much less outside the city walls. The grand nature of this council fits with the one held at Arles in 314, which set the pattern for what would happen at Nicaea.[21] That imperial capital in Gaul had an impressive government complex,[22] so it's hard to imagine the Nicene mega-council, which was far more important, being relegated to a suburban chapel.

And this brings me to my fourth point, which is that modern scholars who have looked into this matter agree that the council was held in the imperial palace inside the walls. In addition to figures such as Professor Şahin or Cyril Mango of Harvard University, archaeologist Ine Jacobs states emphatically in her recent chapter in the *Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea* that "there is no indication at all that the city at the time of the council already possessed a church building . . . it has become clear that the Nicene council had no direct relation to contemporary church architecture . . . The simplest explanation for Constantine's decision to convene the council in the palace is that there were no public churches in Nicaea at the time, or at least none that were suited to accommodate a party of several hundred."[23]

If for these four reasons[24] a wooden church was unlikely to have been built at Nicaea, nor was an Apollo temple likely, does that mean nothing occupied the lakeside spot until the basilica went up in the time of Theodosius? Not necessarily. We know the place was a Christian necropolis, probably centered on the relics of a martyr whom we can call St. Neophytos for lack of a better attribution.[25] The other nearby graves, then, are probably burials *ad sanctos*. It isn't hard to imagine that such a place would have been incorporated into the cult of the saints in the aftermath of the Great Persecution.[26] Perhaps the locals would have put up a wooden pergola or arbor of some kind, which was used for suburban funeral banquets in the presence of the saint's relics. This spot was easily accessible to the civic population through the southwestern gate of the city, not to mention being a lovely waterfront location that Christians would have enjoyed visiting.

Such a facility is exactly what we find at the catacomb of Saint Sebastian on the Via Appia outside of Rome, where the relics of Peter and Paul supposedly resided for a time. This so-called Memoria Apostolorum contained a *triclia*, which is an alternate form of the Latin word *trichila*, which means an arbor, bower, or shady trellis for vines. *Refrigerium* meals were enjoyed at this site, with a nearby well providing water. Many graffiti petitioning Peter and Paul can still be seen carved into the walls of this structure.

Although masonry remains mark out that location today, perhaps we could postulate that an all-wooden affair once stood over the grave of Neophytos, providing the lowermost earthen floor that was found below the existing walls of the Underwater Basilica.[27] Two small areas flanking the main apse, the *diaconicon* and the *prothesis*, were found to have been floored with terracotta tiles.[28] Although Professor Şahin considers the tiles to be related to holy graves, perhaps this could have been instead the floor of a small, outdoor dining facility under a wooden arbor, maybe the area where a *mensa* once stood.

We have known since Peter Brown's seminal work that there was a robust cult of the saints in late antiquity.[29] Dr. Fairchild's forthcoming book, which builds upon the work of William Tabbernee regarding Montanist inscriptions, has demonstrated frequent and widespread funerary concerns in Asia Minor.[30] Grave veneration and the erection of martyrion churches had been happening since the early second century, as attested by the tomb of Philip the Evangelist in Hierapolis.[31] Many martyrion churches were also built in Cilicia and Isauria.[32] Surely the Christians at Nicaea would have wanted to commune with their own saint as well.

In sum, if the Apollo Temple and Wooden Church theories are found wanting, the Funerary Cult theory could help solve the riddle. If there were a designated place for memorial

meals at Nicaea, we could certainly imagine some of the council fathers worshiping or feasting there during the summer of 325. But to suggest that there was a complete "church" made out of wood, and that it was used for significant council proceedings or theological debate, seems like a stretch. The Underwater Basilica most likely marks the site of martyr veneration, not conciliar deliberation.

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[1] This dating comes from the discovery of graves under the foundation of the church's *bema*—graves containing coins from the time of Emperor Valens (364-378) and Emperor Valentinian (378-383).

[2] PBS, *Secrets of the Dead*, Season 20, Episode 5, "The Sunken Basilica." https://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/the-sunken-basilica-pe9yqz/7823/ Segment begins at 39:00.

[3] Ludwig August Dindorf, ed., *Chronicon Paschale*, Vol. 1. *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* (Bonn: Weberi, 1832).

[4] Richard Bayliss provides a chart of the "Dedications of temples destroyed or deconsecrated by Christian activity, according to both historical and archaeological evidence." Of the 43 examples he lists, only two were conversions of temples for Apollo. Clearly, there was no special impetus for Christians to convert Apollo temples to churches. Instead, the temples of Mithras, Zeus, and Asklepios were typically targeted for conversion. *Provincial Cilicia and the Archaeology of Temple Conversion*, British Archaeological Reports, International Series, 1281 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2004), 17.

[5] R.P.C. Hanson, "The Transformation of Pagan Temples into Churches in the Early Christian Centuries," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23 (1978): 257-267; Richard Bayliss, *Provinical Cicilia*; Peter Talloen and Lies Vercauteren, "The Fate of Temples in Late Antique Anatolia," *The Archaeology of Late Antique 'Paganism'* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Paul McKechnie, *Christianizing Asia Minor: Conversion, Communities, and Social Change in the Pre-Constantinian Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[6] "Direct temple conversions are not attested with certainty before the middle of the 5th century, either archaeologically or historically. Until this time, for whatever reason, it is not possible to preserve temples within the fabric of new churches." Bayliss, *Provincial Cilicia*, 57.

[7] Bayliss notes that "extra-mural and rural temples are much more likely to end up as *spolia* churches than be incorporated intact. This is true for villages as well as more remote areas and is particularly well documented in Syria." *Provincial Cilicia*, 21. When martyria were built, they were often housed in urban amphitheaters, not small shrines in the suburbs (33). The only possible parallel in which a pagan temple became a martyrion would be the conversion of heroa into churches, providing continuity for the veneration of the dead at that site (34). An example might be the Shrine of St. Thecla at Seleucia, which some archaeologists suggest was built over a small temple and cave next to a necropolis where pagan cult of the dead had occurred. (89-90). Stephen Hill says it is likely that "the cult of Thecla succeeded that of some pagan deity who had a temple and precinct at Meryemlik," citing three parallel examples which are said to be "not uncommon" in the region (*The Early Byzantine Churches of Cilicia and Isauria*, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs 1 [Variorum Ashgate, 1996], 213; cf. 215). However, in none of those three cases was the successor church built in a pagan necropolis; two were, instead, major civic temples, while the third was a rural commercial center of the saffron trade with a large temple of Zeus (106-110; 111-115; 252-254). This stands in contrast to what is proposed to have happened at Nicaea, where the hypothesized prior location was a suburban temple for an Olympian god that was turned into a Christian necropolis with a substantial martyrion. Such a construction, to my knowledge, has no parallel in antiquity, unless Meryemlik is a lone example.

[8] A Turkish team that conducted a sophisticated geo-electric survey of the area concluded that "the Basilica of St Neophytos was built entirely on the surrounding beachrock formation." H.E. Çınar, et al., "Is Submergence of the Saint Neophytos Basilica (Lake İznik, NW Turkey) Caused by AD740 Earthquake or Climate Change? Discussion of Geoelectrical Data," *International Conferences on Science and Technology* (2019): 7. The other team similarly concluded "that the base structure beneath the basilica is probably the most lakeward extension of this buried beachrock, rather than the remains of an earlier archaeological structure." Erginal, A.E., R.C. Erenoğlu, C. Yıldırım, H.H. Selim, N.G. Kıyak, O. Erenoğlu, E. Ulugergerli and M. Karabıyıkoğlu. "Co-sesmic Beachrock Deformation of 8th Century AD Earthquake in Middle Strand of North Anatolian Fault, Lake İznik, NW Turkey." *Tectonophysics* 799 (2021): 1-8.

[9] In the PBS film, Professor Şahin says, "We still don't know exactly where the First Council was held. It's still up for debate. But it's believed the First Council may well have met here." (PBS, *The Sunken Basilica*, quotation at 5:44.) The mayor of Iznik is especially excited to promote this view, saying, "We still don't know, really, where the First Council was held. But if, as the experts claim, it was indeed here, the sites of the First and Seventh Ecumenical Councils will be in the spotlight. For a small town like Iznik to have a monument like that is very important for us in terms of international tourism." (Ibid., quotation at 33:47.) Likewise, Professor Fairchild states in an article (and an even stronger case is articulated in his forthcoming book), "Archaeologists may be exposing the very church where the Council of Nicaea first met." Mustafa Şahin and Mark Fairchild, "Nicea's Underwater Basilica," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (44.6) 2018.

[10] We need to remember that it would have been very early in the history of Christian architecture for a church to be standing outside the walls of Nicaea prior to the council, which convened only twelve years after the Edict of Milan. Graydon F. Snyder states that there is no "extant church that was certainly built prior to Constantine." *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Mercer University Press, 1985): 67. The vast majority of *ante pacem* Christian buildings were domestic in their architecture, with only a few of them being converted into a hall structure, known as the *aula ecclesiae*. Examples would include Santi Giovanni e Paolo or San Crisogono in Rome, or the one that Diocletian destroyed at Nicomedia, which could have housed a sizeable congregation. But these were the exception. In first quarter of the fourth century, houses were by far the primary model. Little Nicaea was an afterthought as a site for the council—determined only in the spring months before it happened—so there was really no reason for it to have been endowed with a new church in the previous decade. The Constantinian churches that were built in the years after 313 were monumental in nature and located in the tetrarchic capitals or in the Holy Land. Nicaea wouldn't have been a likely candidate for such a building.

[11] Licinius's persecutions are nicely displayed in graphical form at https://www.fourthcentury.com/diolectian-persecution-chart/. Eusebius is our source for those persecutions in *VC* 1.51-52 and 2.1, which are helpfully excerpted via hyperlink at this web site.

[12] "Paul, bishop of Neo-Caesarea, a fortress situated on the banks of the Euphrates, had suffered from the frantic rage of Licinius. He had been deprived of the use of both hands by the application of a red-hot iron, by which the nerves which give motion to the muscles had been contracted and rendered dead. Some had had their right eye dug out, others had lost their right arm. Among these was Paphnutius of Egypt. In short, the council looked like an assembled army of martyrs." Theodoret of Cyrus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.6. Schaff and Wace, *NPNF2*, vol. 3: 43.

[13] Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975), 170.

[14] Ibid., 144.

[15] Stephen Hill, *Early Byzantine Churches*, 11-14. In his discussion of "Building Methods and Materials," he never once mentions wooden-walled churches. However, he notes that "In all cases main roofs consisted of timber and tiles." Though this applies specifically to Cilicia, one would expect generally similar circumstances to pertain at Nicaea.

[16] *Letter of the Synod of Antioch (325)* 15. See https://www.fourthcentury.com/urkunde-18/. Though the letter is only preserved in Syriac, Eduard Schwartz has reconstructed the Greek as τὴν μεγάλην και ἱερατικήν σύνοδον. Schwartz, "Zur Geschichte des Athanasius" *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, Philologisch-Historische Klasse (Gottingen: Luder Horstmann 1905): 278.

[17] I do not agree with Fairchild that a certain remark from Eusebius in the *Life of Constantine* necessarily means that a small church existed at that time into which the 318 bishops and their attendants were miraculously enveloped. Eusebius's Greek is: Τῶν γοῦν ἐκκλησιῶν ἁπασῶν, αἳ τὴν Εὐρώπην ἅπασαν Λιβύην τε καὶ τὴν Ἀσίαν ἐπλήρουν, ὁμοῦ συνῆκτο τῶν τοῦ θεοῦ λειτουργῶν τὰ ἀκροθίνια, εἷς τ' οἶκος εὐκτήριος ὥσπερ ἐκ θεοῦ πλατυνόμενος ἔνδον ἐχώρει. A literal, word for word translation would be: "At any rate, out of all the churches which filled all Europe, Libya, and Asia, the topmost of the ministers of God had been gathered in one place, and one house of prayer, as if being opened wide by God, made room within." The expression "house of prayer" is οἶκος εὐκτήριος, which Lampe's lexicon gives as a general term for a church (G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 566). Indeed, Eusebius used it earlier in his work to refer to the many Christian churches that the persecuting tetrarchs had destroyed (*Vita Constantini* 1.13.2). But here at Nicaea, the house of prayer where the bishops congregated was "opened wide by God." The verb πλατύνω means "to widen or enlarge"—not because the venue was so tiny, but because one building was being tasked with housing the worldwide episcopate at this event. To me, it seems like a stretch to suggest that this must mean a little wooden chapel welcomed several hundred bishops and their attendants, who all fit inside by miraculous accommodation. Instead, Eusebius was probably just saying—with one of his typical rhetorical flourishes—that the imperial palace at Nicaea served as a single spiritual house where all the world's bishops had gathered inside one building. In the immediately preceding section, Eusebius's emphasis was on how so many global prelates had assembled in one place: "[T]hose who were furthest separated from each other, not only in spirit, but in physical presence and territories and places and provinces, were brought together, and one city received them all: a huge ring of priests was to be seen, a crown colour-woven with lovely flowers" (Ibid., 3.6.2. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 123). To Eusebius, it seemed like a near-miracle that one "house of prayer" had enveloped all the world's bishops.

[18] Ibid., 3.10.1 (ἐν τῷ μεσαιτάτῳ οἴκῳ τῶν βασιλείων) Cameron and Hall, 125. NPNF^2 gives, "in the central building of the palace" (1:522). Lampe notes that βασίλειον (which is frequently pluralized in Eusebius) refers not just to a royal dwelling place but to the "imperial court, seat of government" (292). It was the place where the empire's power was localized in a given town. The specific site of the imperial palace at Nicaea was once attributed to certain ruins on the shoreline and jutting into the lake. I personally remember seeing a sign displaying this identification several years ago. However, the sign has now been removed and the location is the subject of scholarly debate. One theory locates it within the northwest quadrant of the city, while another locates it precisely in the center of town. See Mustafa Şahin and İbrahim Mert, *The Proceeding of the International Workshop: Localisation of the 1st Council Palace in Nicaea* (Bursa: Uludağ Universitesi, 2011).

[19] Cyril Mango, "The Meeting Place of the First Ecumenical Council and the Church of the Holy Fathers at Nicaea," Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας [Bulletin of the Christian Archaeological Society] 26.4 (2005): 27-34.

[20] The Underwater Basilica, with its apse, nave, narthex, and atrium, measures only 135 feet long by 60 wide. The interior nave where people could assemble was 3500 square feet, an area smaller than a high school basketball court. Presumably, any previous wooden church would have had the same dimensions or less. Accommodating 300 people in such a tight space is conceivable but not in any way comfortable. Ine Jacobs computes that approximately 3600 to 4800 sq feet would have been required, and this with long tiers so space would have been maximized and those in the rear could have seen over their brethren. "Hosting the Council in Nicaea: Material

Needs and Solutions," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Y.R. Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2021): 86. A wooden church with an interior usable area of 3500 sq feet and no tiers would have been very uncomfortable for the attendees and ill-suited for serious theological deliberations. Eusebius wasn't trying to squeeze the bishops into a church like sardines. His point was simply that at Nicaea, a single building contained the world's foremost prelates. The royal palace was that holy building.

[21] Although the topic of discussion at Arles was Donatism, not Trinitarianism, we can nonetheless discern the grand way in which Constantine conducted his church councils. His letter of summons informs us that this council would require "the presence of a great number of bishops" (Eusebius, *Church History* 10.5.21-24; see https://www.fourthcentury.com/arles-314-summon/). To achieve this, Constantine offered the free use of the *cursus publicus* to the attendees at Arles. By any measure, this was a major imperial affair. The Council of Nicaea, whose issues were more significant as Constantine sought to unify his empire around the Christian faith, could be no less magnificent.

[22] Ancient Arelate in Gaul was a major river port and imperial residence. Constantine himself had lived there from 308 until he vaulted the Alps to advance on Maxentius in Rome in 312. During his stay, he built monumental public baths. This was a golden age at Arelate, though it had long been a great Roman city, as evidenced by the still-extant amphitheater and many other ruins that today make it a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Constantine summoned his council in 314 to a major imperial center. Clearly, the emperor's church councils were envisioned as impressive, palatial affairs

[23] Jacobs, "Hosting," 69, 87.

[24] One final point of evidence that is proffered to support the theory of a suburban, lakeshore location for council meetings needs to be mentioned only in a footnote because it is too implausible to be given substantial discussion. Professor Şahin's article and the PBS program both make mention of it. In Italy during the 1580s, the Sistine Salon on the top floor of the Vatican Apostolic Library was decorated by the painters Giovanni Guerra and Cesare Nebbia. Its end wall contains a fresco depicting the Council of Nicaea. Şahin writes that "the depiction of the landscape … on the left corner of the fresco makes it interesting for our study. Based on the landscape, it appears that the meeting was held in an extramural building and by the Iznik Lake, which shares similarities with the building we are going to excavate" ("Underwater Excavation," 71). He echoes this sentiment on camera in the PBS episode (see 7:30). However, this Vatican fresco isn't a valid source of information about what happened at the council. It probably wasn't an eyewitness painting, since Nicaea in 1580 was well into the Turkish occupation that had existed during the Crusades and was made permanent by the capture of Constantinople in 1453. Though Christian pilgrimage did exist in the Ottoman Empire, it would have been extremely difficult for the painters to have gained accurate information from any Italian traveler or visitor. In any case, historical accuracy wasn't the painters' goal. For interpretation of this artwork, see Wilhelmus Johan Georg Albert Veth, "The Frescoes of the Ecumenical Councils in the Sistine Salon (1590) and the Catholic Conciliar Historiography," *Annuarium Historiae Conciliorum* 34.2 (2002): 209–455. See also Filip Malesevic, *Inventing the Council Inside the Apostolic Library: The Organization of Curial Erudition in Late Cinquecento Rome* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021). Malesevic's detailed study of how the seven ecumenical councils were portrayed (see esp. 350-378) reveals that the painters were primarily concerned with advancing late-sixteenth century politics and Tridentine orthodoxy, using not only the imagery of the enthroned emperor being advised by bishops but even scenes of heretical writings being burned. "This powerful iconography for articulating the superiority of a monarch over theological disputes that a general Church Council was to affirm was considerably modified after the conclusion of the Council of Trent in 1563, aiming specifically at providing an image of this meeting according the perceptions of the Roman Curia and the papacy" (356). The First Council of Nicaea is depicted as occurring in a "fictive space" which represents how the Roman Catholic curia was imagined to have assembled at Trent (358). In other words, this painting was Vatican propaganda, not an accurate historical record of actual buildings. We cannot use sixteenth-century Renaissance art to accurately identify a fourth-century location in Asia Minor. It would be akin to using similar Vatican paintings as evidence for how Jesus delivered the Keys of the Kingdom to Peter, or how Plato and Aristotle strolled around in the Academy at Athens.

[25] This saint is first mentioned in tenth-century *Synaxarion of Constantinople*, a Byzantine hagiographical compilation of saints' lives. See Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, *The Synaxarion: The Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church*, vol. 3, trans. by Christopher Hookway (Ormylia, Greece: Convent of the Annunciation of Our Lady, 2001): 244–246.

[26] We know this place eventually became a site of cult devotion. The discovery of a fifth or sixth-century clay token of Christ Pantocrator (a kind of pilgrimage souvenir) proves this conclusion.

[27] Şahin's team of underwater excavators found that the original floor of the building was 1.6 feet lower than the existing building's walls. To Şahin and Fairchild, this suggested the existence of a prior building that "had no stone or mosaic paving, indicating that the earlier structure had an earthen or wooden floor." Şahin and Fairchild, "Nicea's Underwater Basilica." https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/niceas-underwater-basilica/

[28] "After the investigations in the area of the apse were completed, we worked in the area north of it, which we consider to be part of the prothesis. The 82 cm long and 65 cm wide foundation wall made of mud mortar and rubble stone, which extends west from the central area of the east wall of the building, is remarkable. In addition, a second floor was found that lay parallel to this wall. The floor, which is 397 cm long and 83 cm wide and is covered with terracotta tiles, is, in our opinion, part of a grave floor." Mustafa Şahin, "Neue Forschungen und Ausgrabungen in Der Basilika des İznik Sees," *Imperial Residence and Site of Councils: The Metropolitan Region of Nicaea/Nicomedia*, Band 96, Asia Minor Studien: Imperial Residence and Site of Councils (Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 2020): 100.

[29] Peter Robert Lamont Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Harvard University Press, 1978); *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (University of California Press, 1982).

[30] A parallel to St. Neophytos can be seen in a certain Trophimos from Synnada, a city in Phrygia about 200 miles from Nicaea. A late-third-century ossuary bears the inscription, "Here within are contained (the) bones of the martyr Trophimos." According to the *Acta*

Sancti Trophimi, Trophimos and two companions were martyred for evangelizing Apollo worshippers sometime during the reign of Emperor Probus (c. 276-282). Regardless of whether the passion account is true, Tabbernee affirms that the ossuary belongs to the actual martyr and "literary and epigraphic testimony to a *martyrium* of Trophimos…confirms the existence of a cult of St. Trophimos at Synnada." This person likely wasn't a Montanist but belonged to "mainstream Christianity." If such a figure can possess an honorable burial and cult at Synnada, so too could martyr veneration have existed at Nicaea for Neophytos. William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism*. Patristic Monograph Series 16 (Mercer University Press, 1997): 236-240; see also his *Early Christianity in Contexts* (Baker Academic, 2014): 261-319.

[31] Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey: A Guide to the Jewish and Christian Sites of Asia Minor* (Ege Yayınları, 2014): 245-47.

[32] Stephen Hill documents many examples of martyrological churches in Cilicia and Isauria, some as early as the fourth century but primarily from the fifth. Their architectural pattern is based on the Constantinian pilgrimage churches of Palestine. Hill notes that some churches in the area known as Rough Cilicia had passageways behind the apse which he argues served as ambulatories for processing around a martyr's remains (*Early Byzantine Churches*, 28-37). Although those churches are similar to the Underwater Basilica in many ways, no such passageway existed at Nicaea.