

4 Hosting the Council in Nicaea *Material Needs and Solutions*

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INTRODUCTION

Despite all that is written on the content, impact, and importance of the Council of Nicaea, we know very little about the actual physical circumstances in which it took place, the appearance of the city of Nicaea at the time of the council, the travel and lodging of its participants, and the location where it was held, the so-called palace. There is also uncertainty about the number of participants as well as the start and end dates of the proceedings. The last two issues are explored by David Gwynn in chapter 5, whereas I will focus on the surroundings and circumstances in which the council took place. In the first part, I will summarise what we know of the city of Nicaea, what it looked like in the early fourth century, and if it had the necessary infrastructure to host a large gathering, before asking why the council was moved here. As will become clear, this question needs to be split into two: why was the council transferred from Ancyra to Nicaea and why was Nicaea chosen over Nicomedia? The second part of this chapter considers the palace of Nicaea and physical form of the council hall. It will explore both the possibility of the council taking place in a large basilica-like setting and an alternative of the bishops convening inside a rotunda. Finally, I briefly compare the setting of the Nicaean Council to that of contemporary Christian meeting places.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE CITY OF NICAEA

Nicaea was a wealthy city, located on the eastern shore of Lake Askania, modern-day Lake Iznik, in western Bithynia (Figs. 4.1–4.2). It was situated in a wide and fertile valley, surrounded by mountains. The settlement was connected to the nearby Sea of Marmara via the main highway leading from the Balkans to central Anatolia and extending to the southeast toward Syria. Nicaea was founded around the year 300 BC and has remained continuously occupied since then. Consequently, despite its

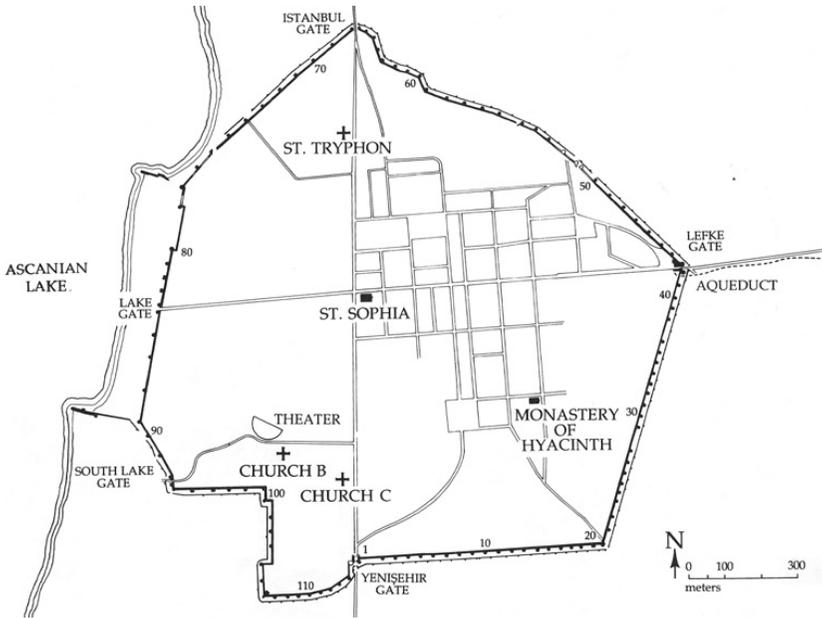


FIGURE 4.1 Plan of Roman Nicaea, from Foss 1996a, Fig. 1 (© Holy Cross Orthodox Press). Used with permission.

very rich history and abundant material remains, modern-day occupation makes archaeological research very difficult. In the last few years, however, new research projects aiming to examine the ancient street grid and ancient monuments by means of geophysical prospection and a thorough investigation of reused building material have expanded our knowledge of the city's monuments.¹ Much of our information on the city of Nicaea comes from literary sources, including a brief description from Strabo, a passage in the *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, a section in the hagiography of Neophytus, and various inscriptions.²

The first monument that visitors, including all bishops participating in the council, to the city of Nicaea would have seen was its state-of-the-art defensive system.³ These walls were the second defensive system

¹ See, for instance, Rabbel et al. 2015; the project "Micro-Identities of Bithynia during the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial Times: Archaeological Survey in Nicaea (Izник/Turkey)" of the Ruhr-Universität Bochum. Peschlow 2017, gives a recent overview of the material remains from antique and Byzantine times discovered at Nicaea.

² Şahin 1979–87; Abbasoğlu and Delemen 2003; Şahin 2003.

³ These walls have been studied in detail in Schneider and Karnapp 1938; Foss and Winfield 1986.



FIGURE 4.2 Aerial view of Nicaea [GoogleEarth, accessed October 1, 2018]. Used under the terms of fair usage as per the rightsholders terms and conditions.

with which the city had been equipped. The first wall circuit, built around 300 BC and described by the geographer Strabo as being 16 stadia or c. 2960 m long, fell into disuse and disappeared during Roman times.⁴ Rather than by continuous walls, the new and larger city area was indicated by freestanding Roman triumphal arches built under Vespasian at the ends of the city's main streets.⁵ One of them, the Lefke Gate (east), furthermore bears testimony to Hadrian's rebuilding of the city after an earthquake.⁶

When the Goths crossed the Black Sea and devastated northwest Asia Minor in AD 258, Nicaea as well as the other rich cities of the region were entirely defenceless. The Nicaeans fled their home and returned only after the Goths had withdrawn, having burned the city. Wall construction started soon afterwards.⁷ The city's coins minted under Gallienus (253–68) and the usurpers Macrianus and Quietus (260–61)

⁴ Strabo, *Geography* 12.4.7.

⁵ Schneider and Karnapp 1938, 45, nos. 11–12 (Lefke Gate), 48, nos. 24–25 (Istanbul Gate); Foss 2003, 249; Şahin 2003, 18–20.

⁶ Schneider and Karnapp 1938, 45, no. 12.

⁷ Foss 1996a, 5; Foss 2003, 250.

indicate that construction began almost immediately and continued for some twenty years. The monument was finally dedicated in the reign of Claudius Gothicus (268–70), as attested by two dedicatory inscriptions on the new city walls, one on the Yenişehir Gate and one on the Lake Gate.⁸ The new circuit was 5 km long and enclosed an area of some 210 ha. The walls were 4 m thick and rose to a height of 9 m. They consisted of a mortared rubble core, faced with coursed rubble and interspersed by bands of four layers of brick, and the circuit was accompanied by a moat. Every 60–70 m a brick-faced tower was inserted.⁹ The existing triumphal arches were provided with square towers and reused as the four main city gates: the Istanbul Gate (north), the Lefke Gate (east), the Yenişehir Gate (south) and the Lake Gate (west). There was one smaller gate in the southwest.¹⁰ These new walls followed a type that so far had only been applied in military contexts.¹¹ They represented the newest, most advanced system of fortification that would also inspire the builders at Nicomedia when the capital of Bithynia was provided with new walls a few decades later under Diocletian (284–305).¹² The third-century walls remained standing virtually untouched until the year 727 and were maintained and restored throughout the Byzantine period.

From its foundation, Nicaea had an orthogonal north–south and east–west oriented street system, which is still largely preserved in the layout of modern-day Iznik (Fig. 4.2). In the middle of the fourth century, the author of the *Expositio totius mundi et gentium* commented that:

it is difficult to find elsewhere a city plan like that of Nicaea; one would think it a model set for all cities on account of its regularity and beauty, which are such that the tops of all its buildings, adorned with equal symmetry, appear to offer a splendid view to the beholder. It is decorated and harmonious in every respect.¹³

The main streets that connected the city gates were colonnaded. They met in the centre of the city at a crossroads that may have been marked by a tetrapylon. At least, the presence of such a monument somewhere within the walls is indicated by an inscription.¹⁴ Beyond the east gate,

⁸ Schneider and Karnapp 1938, 43, nos. 1 and 50, no. 32.

⁹ Foss and Winfield 1986, 79–117; Crow 2001, 90.

¹⁰ Foss 2003, 250; Şahin 2003, 17.

¹¹ Crow 2001, 90–91.

¹² Foss and Winfield 1986, 129–30; Crow 2001, 90–91; Foss 2003, 251.

¹³ *Expositio totius mundi et gentium* 19, cited and translated by Foss 1996a, 9.

¹⁴ Şahin 1979–87, I:135, no. 173.

traces of an aqueduct have been noted. The theatre of Nicaea has been located and excavated in the southwest of the city, whereas a monumental gate, thought to belong to the gymnasium, still stands in the centre near the St. Sophia Church Mosque.¹⁵ Literary sources and coins moreover testify to the presence of a temple dedicated to Rome and Caesar and temples dedicated to Apollo, Asclepius, Dionysus, and Tyche,¹⁶ all of which must still have been standing at the time of the council. Finally, Nicaea may also have housed a treasury where tax revenue, in the form of goods, gold, and bullion, was deposited.¹⁷ If so, it would have had to cooperate closely with the mint that was located in Nicomedia.

By contrast, there is no indication at all that the city at the time of the council already possessed a church building.¹⁸ The evidence for the Christian community at Nicaea in the first quarter of the fourth century overall is scattered; in contrast, the presence of an educated pagan elite is much better attested.¹⁹ The city had its own early Christian martyrs, the earliest of which, Tryphon, supposedly died for this faith under the persecutions of Decius (249–51), whereas Neophytos the Martyr, and possibly also Eustathios, Theodote, Antonia, and Bassos, fell victim to the Great Persecution under Diocletian and Galerius (303).²⁰ The earliest material remains are Christian tombstones,²¹ whereas the oldest architectural evidence is a brightly painted chamber tomb (*hypogaeum*) in the necropolis to the northwest of the city, probably from the mid-fourth century, whose decoration includes peacocks, flowers, and a Christogram.²² The existence of a cathedral as well as an extra-urban church dedicated to Saint Diomedes is suggested in literary sources by the reign of Valens.²³ St. Sophia, the best known late antique basilica at Nicaea and the setting of the second Ecumenical council in 787, was constructed as late as the second half of the fifth century.²⁴ Two meters underneath the surface of Lake Iznik, about 20 m away from the shore, lie the typical remains of another late antique basilica surrounded by tombs, possibly a memorial church for Neophytos the Martyr.²⁵ The building,

¹⁵ Abbasoğlu and Delemen 2003, 191–92.

¹⁶ Abbasoğlu and Delemen 2003, 192.

¹⁷ Foss 1996a, 10.

¹⁸ Peschlow 2003.

¹⁹ Foss 1996a, 8–9.

²⁰ Foss 1996a, 5–7.

²¹ Şahin 1979–87, 1:265–67, nos. 516–18.

²² Firatlı 1974.

²³ Foss 1996a, 16, n. 24.

²⁴ Schneider 1943, 10–17; Möllers 1994, 39–48.

²⁵ The building was discovered in 2014: <http://arkeolojihaber.net/2014/02/26/1600-yil-lik-bazilikanin-sirri-cozuluyor/> [accessed 26 June 2018]. Underwater excavations

which may have been built on the location of an older Roman temple, has been tentatively dated to the late fourth century.

WHY ORGANIZE A CHURCH COUNCIL AT NICAEA?

The question why the council was organised in Nicaea can be split into two separate queries: first, why was the council not held in Ancyra, as was originally planned? And second, why was the council moved to Nicaea specifically, and not, for instance, to nearby Nicomedia, where Constantine is known to have resided regularly?

Ancyra was a logical choice for a church council. The city was the centre of the province of Galatia; it was also the most important road junction in central Asia Minor; its bishop, the metropolitan bishop of Galatia, was highly ranked in the ecclesiastical hierarchy; and Ancyra had already hosted a synod in 314, which had dealt with matters arising from behaviour shown during the persecutions.²⁶ Transfers of councils are known to have happened at other (later) occasions in ecclesiastical history, but in such cases the reasons for the transfer are quite obvious. In 358, the Roman emperor Constantius II ordered two councils to be held on the topic of the Arian controversy, one of the western bishops at Ariminum and one of the eastern bishops at Nicomedia. An earthquake struck Nicomedia though, killing the bishop Cecropius. A transfer to Nicaea was briefly anticipated, but due to the proximity of Nicaea to Nicomedia, it was not considered a safe venue either. Eventually, the eastern council only took place on 27 September 359 in Seleucia, on the south coast of Turkey.²⁷

In contrast, the reason or reasons to move the council of 325 from Ancyra to Nicaea has been the topic of some debate. According to a Greek document only preserved in a Syriac translation, Constantine himself gave three grounds, all of them pragmatic. He first referred to the more wholesome climate of Nicaea. He also pointed out that the city was conveniently located, easy to reach for the bishops from Italy and Europe who would be attending. Finally, the proximity to the imperial court at Nicomedia was given as a factor.²⁸ To the contrary, it has been argued in modern literature that the reasons for moving the council were

were begun in 2015: <http://arkeofili.com/iznik-golunun-altindaki-1500-yillik-bazilik-ziyarete-aciliyor/> and www.livescience.com/63498-ancient-church-hidden-in-turkey-lake.html [accessed 12 October 2018]. See also Peschlow 2017, 209.

²⁶ Foss 1977, 36–37.

²⁷ Socrates (Socr.), *Historia ecclesiastica* (HE) 2.39.

²⁸ Opitz 1934 (*Urk.* 20).

political rather than practical. According to Drake, Constantine took into account the objections raised by Eusebius of Nicomedia on holding the council in a locale that was overseen by a staunch opponent of Arianism, bishop Marcellus of Ancyra. Constantine had already learned the hard way that the bishop who would be given the prerogative of presiding over the council could strongly influence the outcome and apparently wished to avoid this from happening.²⁹

Be that as it may, there is no denying that Nicaea was a much more convenient location than Ancyra for what not only became the first ecumenical council, attended by bishops from both east and west, but also the first council in which the emperor himself participated. The second reason given by Constantine himself therefore certainly is a solid one. Synods had generally been held at a location that was opportune for all their participants. Thus, the bishops of the African church met in Carthage, or, more exceptionally, in Hippo.³⁰ Both cities had good harbours and were located centrally on the densely inhabited North African coastline. Even though for most bishops the journey could largely be made overseas, it was still considered an onerous undertaking and also meant they had to be away from their sees for a lengthy period of time. The Synod of Carthage in 407 eventually stipulated that it was not necessary to meet on a yearly basis but that synods should only be held when necessary for the entire African territory and, moreover, in locations that were most convenient for the purpose.³¹

The Council of Nicaea greatly surpassed its predecessors in terms of the number of attending bishops.³² The previous synod of Ancyra had been attended by about a dozen bishops, nowhere near the size of the council called in late 324 or 325. Moreover, most of these bishops no doubt had come from within Asia Minor. The Synod of Elvira, held around 305–6 in modern-day Granada in Hispania Baetica, had an attendance of nineteen bishops and twenty-six presbyters, most of them in charge of sees within the province itself.³³ The Synod of Arles, called by Constantine in 314, had at least twenty-five and at most forty-four attendants.³⁴ From this point of view, the decision to move a council to which bishops from all over the empire had been invited to participate to a coastal location was very sensible. For delegate bishops from around

²⁹ Drake 2006, 125.

³⁰ Beaver 1936, 173–75.

³¹ Beaver 1936, 176–77.

³² David Gwynn discusses the numbers more specifically in chapter 5.

³³ For a recent overview of the Council of Elvira, see Streeter 2006.

³⁴ Munier 1963, 14–22.

the Mediterranean, the travel distance to Nicaea would have been considerably shorter than that to Ancyra, as they did not have to travel an additional ten days overland after disembarking at Nicomedia. For instance, according to *ORBIS: The Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World*, Alexander would have been able to make the journey from Alexandria over the sea in April in sixteen days, seventeen if he waited a bit longer to commence his journey, but it would have taken him twenty-six or twenty-seven days to get to Ancyra. Likewise, it would have taken the Arabian bishop Pamphilus, potentially residing in Anasartha,³⁵ ten fewer days to get to Nicaea than to Ancyra. Conversely, many of the bishops of inland Asia Minor – and more than a hundred bishops came from Asia Minor – were suddenly confronted with a longer travel time.³⁶

Constantine's third reason to bring the council to Nicaea, its proximity to Nicomedia, was a very sound one as well. Even though the Council of Rome in 313 as well as the Council of Arles in 314 had taken place on Constantine's instigation, he had not physically been present.³⁷ Initially, Constantine may not have been involved in the decision to organise a great council at Ancyra to decide on the fate of Arianism or have had the intention to participate in such a council. The decision appears to have been made at a synod of Alexandria, where Ossius, the emperor's representative, was present, but not the emperor himself.³⁸ From the moment Constantine decided to be directly involved in the fate of Christianity by attending and even presiding over the council, that decision was crucial for finalising the council's location.³⁹ Despite his frequent travels, Constantine ruled from Nicomedia, at least until the formal dedication of Constantinople. Nicomedia had been upgraded to the status of imperial capital under Diocletian because of its central and strategic location on both land and sea routes. Constantinople would share these characteristics. Conversely, Ancyra may have been located strategically within the region of Asia Minor, but it was twelve days away from the nearest Aegean harbour, some eight days from Heraclea Pontica, the nearest Black Sea harbour, and some sixteen days removed from Tarsus on the south coast of Asia Minor.⁴⁰ In

³⁵ Shahid 1984, 337–39.

³⁶ Honigmann 1942–43.

³⁷ Girardet 1993, 331–32. See also the discussion by Hal Drake in chapter 6, 113–16.

³⁸ Barnes 1981, 213.

³⁹ Girardet 1993, argues that Constantine not only attended but also presided over the Council of Nicaea.

⁴⁰ <http://orbis.stanford.edu/> [accessed 1 October 2018].

view of the recent turbulent history of the empire and the frequent problems along the Danube border, it would have been unwise for an emperor to be removed so far away from a strategic base with good access to both the eastern and northern frontier for too long. It must have been pretty clear from the beginning that a council with an agenda as long and important as that of, eventually, Nicaea would not be over in a matter of days. Nicaea certainly was much closer to Nicomedia than to Ancyra. *ORBIS* indicates a travel distance of 58 km, easily covered in two days of travel, between Nicomedia and Nicaea.⁴¹

From the moment emperors started attending church councils, ecumenical and others, it is apparent that the meetings frequently took place at locations where they resided or that were convenient to them. For instance, Constantius, who had a residence in Sirmium, convened the first council of Sirmium in 347. Three more would follow there, in 351, 357, and 358. Milan, the western imperial capital for most of the fourth century, can be regarded as a western counterpart to Sirmium, with three synods between 345 and 389. In 451, the ecumenical council that was initially planned to take place at Nicaea for obvious symbolic reasons was moved to Chalcedon for the convenience of the emperor Marcian.⁴² These council locations were therefore a consequence of the personal involvement of emperors who did not have the time in between all other matters of state to travel long distances to attend to ecclesiastical matters.

As to the first reason recorded in antiquity, the more pleasant climate of Nicomedia, the northwest of Turkey also today in summer certainly is much more bearable than the Anatolian plateau, even though Strabo commented that the town was not very salubrious in summer.⁴³

If Constantine thought it opportune to bring the council to him, for political and/or practical reasons, why did he bring it to Nicaea instead of Nicomedia? We know that Constantine was in Nicomedia in February 325 and again from the end of July to mid-September.⁴⁴ 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.

Nicaea was the second largest city in the province of Bithynia, after the capital Nicomedia, although its rural territory may have been the largest. In Byzantine times, the importance of Nicaea would grow, first

⁴¹ In comparison, the distance between Nicomedia and Ancyra was 358 km or twelve days.

⁴² Theodore the Reader, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.3.4. (PG 86:168).

⁴³ Strabo, *Geography* 12.4.7.

⁴⁴ Barnes 1982, 76.

when the city became the capital of the Opsician theme in the eighth century and thus a central military base controlling access to Constantinople, and eventually in the early thirteenth century, after the fall of Constantinople, when the city became the residence of the Laskarid "Empire of Nicaea" (1204–61).⁴⁵ In Roman and late Roman times, however, Nicaea remained overshadowed in size and importance by Nicomedia. This did not stop Nicaea from relentlessly contesting Nicomedia's primacy.⁴⁶ The conflict appeared to have ended when Nicaea, having given its support to Pescennius Niger, was stripped of its titles by Septimius Severus (probably in early 194).⁴⁷ It would, however, resurface in late antiquity, when the Nicaeans appealed to the emperor Valentinian to have the title of metropolis returned to them.⁴⁸ In addition, in 368, the bishop of Nicaea was granted metropolitan status and thus raised to the same rank as the bishop of Nicomedia.⁴⁹ The bishop of Nicaea started to interfere in matters that were within the jurisdiction of the bishop of Nicomedia. At the Council of Chalcedon, an entire day was spent on the matter, and Nicaea was forced to acknowledge that its metropolitan designation was purely honorific.⁵⁰

Nicomedia's location was vastly superior to that of Nicaea.⁵¹ Like Nicaea, it was positioned in a fertile territory, on the military road leading from Chalcedon to Ancyra in inland Anatolia. However, as Nicomedia overlooked the Gulf of Attacus in the east of the Propontis (Sea of Marmara), it developed into a major commercial and military port, housing the imperial fleet.⁵² For this reason, Nicomedia had been favoured by emperors already in the third century.⁵³ With Diocletian, Nicomedia rose to prominence as one of the Tetrarchic capitals, officially dedicated in 304.⁵⁴ As part of its new status, it was provided with a

⁴⁵ Foss 1996a, 17, 57–77; Peschlow 2017.

⁴⁶ Robert 1977.

⁴⁷ Şahin 1979–87, 1:19–21, nos. 25–26, 25–27, nos. 29–30, 49, nos. 53–54; Şahin 2003, 11.

⁴⁸ Şahin 1979–87, 4:31–32, T23 and 4:37–41, T26; Şahin 2003, 12.

⁴⁹ Şahin 2003, 12.

⁵⁰ Foss 1996a, 12–13.

⁵¹ Foss 1996b, 1. For an overview of the archaeological research carried out at Nicomedia, see Karababa 2008, 70–75. Our knowledge of Roman Nicomedia, like Roman Nicaea, is rather patchy and mainly based on literary sources, since Nicomedia, modern-day Izmit, has also been permanently occupied since antiquity, which prevents systematic excavations.

⁵² Karababa 2008, 67.

⁵³ For a detailed overview of the importance of the city to emperors, see Karababa 2008, 8–12.

⁵⁴ This is proven in the most spectacular fashion in the series of relief panels depicting an adventus scene of the co-emperors Diocletian and Maximian (Ağtürk 2018).

wall circuit, which, as said above, took inspiration from the walls of Nicaea, as well as several new building complexes, including a palace, an arms factory, a mint, a circus, and a basilica.⁵⁵ We know of one Christian church in Nicomedia, as Lactantius notes that this building, which was located in a residential area, was plundered and destroyed by imperial troops in the Great Persecution of 303. The building was replaced under Constantine.⁵⁶ As in Nicaea, there is not much other evidence for the presence of a sizeable or important Christian population in Nicomedia,⁵⁷ even though the prestige gained when the city became an imperial capital would make its bishop's position a highly influential and thus desirable one.

Nicomedia remained important in later centuries as well, and regular mention was made of emperors and their families residing here.⁵⁸ As already said, Constantine resided in Nicomedia on at least two occasions in 325 and generally treated the city as his capital between 324 and 330. The emperor's presence was attested again at the end of July 327; he was present at the church council of Nicomedia from December 327 to January 328; and he visited in early March of the same year. After the dedication of Constantinople on 11 May 330, he returned to the city only twice more, in 331 and in 334, both times for brief visits.⁵⁹ Constantine no doubt stayed in the palace built for Diocletian, which he probably had renovated, as Eusebius claims it had burned down during the reign of Diocletian.⁶⁰ Later emperors known to have spent time in Nicomedia include Arcadius and Theodosius II, who each stayed at least a month in the city.⁶¹

From the summary above, it is clear that there was not much practical advantage in moving the council to Nicaea rather than to Nicomedia. For the bishops who had already gathered in Ancyra, it would have only meant a minor time gain, as they would have reached Nicaea two days earlier travelling over the highway in the direction of

⁵⁵ Lactantius (Lact.), *De mortibus persecutorum* (DMP) 7.8–10, cited by Humphrey 1986, 581–82; Karababa 2008, 10. The imperial palace at Nicomedia has been located, but it is badly understood. Excavations in Diocletian's palace have begun in earnest in 2016 under the supervision of the Kocaeli Museum.

⁵⁶ Lact., DMP 11.7–8; Eusebius (Eus.), *De vita Constantini* (VC) 3.50 (*Oratio ad Sanctos* 25). Discussed in Johnson 1984, 123–24, who rightfully concludes that there is no reason to assume this church was remarkable or spectacular in any way.

⁵⁷ Johnson 1984, 124.

⁵⁸ Karababa 2008, 11.

⁵⁹ Barnes 1982, 77–79.

⁶⁰ Eus., *Historia ecclesiastica* (HE) 8.6.6.

⁶¹ *Codex Theodosianus* 6.4.32 (397), 12.12.16 (426), 8.7.21–23 (426); *Codex Justinianus* 11.62.9 (398), cited by Foss 1996a, 10, n. 58.

Chalcedon. Conversely, for Constantine and all bishops still arriving from overseas, Nicomedia would have been a far more convenient venue. Therefore, the reasons for not doing so in this case must have been entirely political and can be connected to Nicomedia's ambitious bishop Eusebius. Having exchanged in a brilliant career move his first see in Berytus for the much more high-end imperial capital of Nicomedia,⁶² Eusebius held a special status in the early fourth-century church and became remarkably influential as he, literally, was close to the emperor.⁶³ The ultimate confirmation of his high standing is the fact that, despite Eusebius's temporary deposition between 325 and 328, he became an ecclesiastical advisor to Constantine and was the bishop who administered the emperor's baptism in 337.⁶⁴

In the years leading up to the Council of Nicaea, however, Eusebius showed himself a staunch supporter of the Arian cause and, moreover, used his perceived authority to convene a synod of his own to force Alexander to reinstate Arius to communion. Eusebius appears in the sources as an extremely influential, arrogant, and calculating ecclesiastical ruler, whose impact needed to be curtailed. Constantine may have responded to Eusebius's objections against holding the council in Ancyra, but apparently was not planning to add to the bishop's prestige by giving him the right to preside over what would become by far the biggest council in Christian history thus far. The move to Nicaea can be considered a clear statement on the part of Constantine in terms of who was in charge. Theognis, the contemporary bishop of Nicaea and also an Arian supporter, was of an entirely different rank, as Nicaea did not hold the same prestige in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, simply because it was not the imperial capital. Both Theognis and Eusebius would be deposed at the Council of Nicaea as they refused to recognise Arius's dismissal.⁶⁵ They were restored three years later, in 328, at a council that was held, more conveniently, at Nicomedia.

When it was time to celebrate the emperor's *vicennalia*, the entire imperial retinue and bishops gathered in Nicomedia. Eusebius describes how all bishops who partook in the council were invited to take part in the *vicennalia* celebrations inside the imperial palace on 25 July 325, at which time "soldiers ringed the entrance to the palace, guarding it with drawn swords, and between these the men of God passed fearlessly, and

⁶² Johnson 1984, 117.

⁶³ Socr., *HE* 1.6, discusses Eusebius's career. See also the chapter by Sara Parvis in this volume, 229–32, 239–42.

⁶⁴ Barnes 1981, 226.

⁶⁵ Barnes 1981, 225–29.

entered the innermost royal courts."⁶⁶ The text in the *Vita Constantini* is unclear as to which palace this passage pertains, an ambiguity that some secondary literature has copied. Jerome is more explicit and places the celebrations in Nicomedia, not Nicaea.⁶⁷ It would indeed be very surprising to learn that the emperor started his *vicennalia* celebrations in a city other than his regular residence.

TRAVEL TO AND LODGING AT NICAEA

Before we move on to the physical setting of the council, some brief words on the travel, accommodation, and subsistence of the bishops whilst at Nicaea. All costs were apparently covered by the state treasury, including travel expenses, lodging, and meals.⁶⁸ Bishops travelling to Nicaea could make use either of state-provided pack-animals or of the *cursus publicus*, the imperial postal service.⁶⁹ With these services, Constantine repeated a prerogative granted for the first time to the bishops attending the Council of Arles in 314.⁷⁰ It would be repeated for later councils as well.⁷¹ Travelling was an expensive undertaking. The costs, on top of the prospect of a prolonged absence from their sees, no doubt deterred bishops from attending councils. This munificence therefore no doubt ensured a greater attendance and encouraged bishops from far-away sees such as Persia and Spain to make the journey to the northwest of Asia Minor.

There is no information on where the bishops and their retinue stayed during their three months at Nicaea. Perhaps a select few of them stayed inside the so-called palace at Nicaea, which will be discussed in the next section. We know for instance that several dozen participants in the Council of Serdica in 343 were lodged in the imperial palace.⁷² However, considering the number of bishops, to which the members of their entourage need to be added – each bishop had permission to travel with a small retinue of two priests and three deacons, so that the total number of ecclesiastical visitors to Nicaea may be somewhere between 1,200 and 1,900 – it is more likely that they were lodged in private houses all over the city.

⁶⁶ Eus., *VC* 3.15.2.

⁶⁷ Jerome, *Chronicon* 231^c.

⁶⁸ Eus., *VC* 3.9.

⁶⁹ Eus., *VC* 3.6.1.

⁷⁰ Eus., *HE* 10.5.21–24.

⁷¹ In later centuries as well, it was possible for bishops to travel to church councils for free (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 21.16.18), discussed in Arce 2016, 150–51.

⁷² Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum ad monachos* 15.5. Discussed in De Sena 2014.

THE IMPERIAL PALACE AT NICAEA

As mentioned in the introduction to this volume, the Hollywood depiction of the setting of the council is full of anachronisms. One such anachronism is the portrayal of the council taking place inside a Christian basilica. As with the content of the council, we risk falling into the trap of projecting the end result back in time, assuming that important church events and gatherings must have taken place in churches. Yet, literary sources leave no doubt that the council gathered not in one of the Christian basilicas of Nicaea, which as described above probably did not yet exist in this time, but inside the palace itself. According to Eusebius, the council gathered in “the very innermost hall of the palace, which appeared to exceed the rest in size.”⁷³ Gregory, a presbyter of the church of Caesarea in Cappadocia, similarly described the setting as a huge hall, detached from the palace, in his *Laudation of the 318 Fathers*, a text that probably dates to the first half of the eighth century.⁷⁴

First of all, it is useful to inquire what an imperial palace in the early fourth century would have entailed. The term “palace” (*palatium*, *basileion*) in antiquity was very ambiguous and by itself tells us very little about the appearance or the extent of the complex.⁷⁵ It was used to denote every lodging where the emperor on his travels took up residence.⁷⁶ Thus Julian described his mud and wood lodgings at Batnae during his campaign against the Sassanids as a *basileia*.⁷⁷ In most cases, however, a mansion, villa, town house, or *praetorium* can be surmised, since the emperor generally travelled with a large retinue, all members of which needed to be provided with accommodation and food, and presumably needed to be nearby when called upon.⁷⁸ Some authors have doubted the presence of a building complex reserved solely for the emperor at Nicaea. There indeed is no evidence for or mention of an imperial residence before it became the location of the council according to Eusebius. There would also not have been time to build a palace once the decision to move the council to Nicaea was made.⁷⁹ The characterization of the building as a palace in any case stuck, and it turned up in later sources as well. Ammianus Marcellinus recounted how in 364,

⁷³ Eus., *VC* 3.10.1 (trans. Cameron and Hall 1999, 125).

⁷⁴ Mango 2005, nn. 24–25 for further references, 30–32 for a discussion of its date.

⁷⁵ Arce 1997, 302; Wilson 2014.

⁷⁶ Millar 1977, 41; Arce 2016, 153.

⁷⁷ Julian, *Epistulae* 98, discussed in Arce 2016, 153.

⁷⁸ MacMullen 1976, 35.

⁷⁹ Peschlow 2003, 201.

Valentinian addressed the army in a camp presumably outside the walls, after which he was escorted to the palace.⁸⁰ We know from Procopius that there was still a palace in the time of Justinian, who had it restored as it was in disrepair and apparently partially collapsed.⁸¹

Moreover, there is reason to suspect that the imperial palace in Nicaea was more than the house of a prominent local citizen or high-ranking public servant occasionally turned into an imperial residence. There are some indications that Nicaea already had attracted imperial attention before the fourth century. If Nicaea was indeed the location of an imperial treasury, it obviously played an important role in the imperial administration. Moreover, an imperial interest in the city of Nicaea is chiefly suggested by its wall circuit described above. Its novel military architecture, together with two imperial inscriptions and two fragments of relief sculpture that probably derive from a monument for the Tetrarchs and were built into the wall at a later date, offer further support.⁸² Imperial capitals from the Tetrarchic period onwards, including not only Nicomedia, but also Thessalonica, Antioch, and Constantinople, were given very similar fortification systems, inspired by the circuit at Nicaea. The investment of central resources in the Nicaea defensive system has even led Crow to suggest that the walls were built in order to prepare Nicaea to be an imperial centre.⁸³ Therefore, even if the palace grew out of an already existing structure, by the early fourth century it must have been substantial enough for the emperor not only to reside there himself at least intermittently during the duration of the council, but also to accommodate an assembly of bishops, some of them with their advisors, amounting probably to more than 300 people. It is certainly not unusual for imperial palaces to incorporate and extend older private villas. For instance, the residential area in Galerius's palace at Thessalonica grew out of an existing luxurious elite house of the second and third centuries AD.

The location of the palace of Nicaea remains unknown; but if we accept that the council hall was turned into the Church of the Holy Fathers that is mentioned on several occasions in later sources, it can be surmised that it was located in the northern sector of the city, not too far removed from the Istanbul Gate and the city walls. Indeed, the ninth-century Chronicle of Theophanes suggests that the church was located in proximity to a section of the city wall destroyed by the

⁸⁰ Amm., *Res gestae* 26.1.3–5, 26.2.

⁸¹ Procopius, *De aedificiis* 5.3.3.

⁸² Crow 2001; Crow 2017, 409. The relief sculpture is discussed in Laubscher 1975.

⁸³ Crow 2001, 91.

Arabs in 727.⁸⁴ The area near the Istanbul Gate especially was so badly damaged that it needed to be rebuilt,⁸⁵ hence it is not unreasonable to assume the presence of both the church and the palace in this area.

In order to get a better idea of what the palace in which the council took place potentially looked like, it is worthwhile briefly discussing what we know of nearly contemporary residences of emperors elsewhere and how they related to other luxurious private houses.

Earlier emperors had villas outside of Rome, but permanent imperial residences only multiplied with Diocletian and the Tetrarchy. A range of literary and archaeological evidence confirms palaces occupied by reigning emperors in the early fourth century at Milan, Trier, Sirmium, Serdica, Thessalonica, and Antioch, as well as at Nicomedia.⁸⁶ Of all these, only the internal plan of the palace at Thessalonica is relatively well known (Fig. 4.3).⁸⁷ The imperial complex of Galerius took up the southeastern section of the city. It was located next to the eastern city walls and stretched from the famous Rotunda in the north, originally intended to be either a temple or a mausoleum, to the harbour area in the south. Visitors to the palace would have been led through the Arch of Galerius and a vestibule, over a monumental marble staircase, into a porticoed square. From here, one could gain access to the hippodrome to

⁸⁴ Theophanes, *Chronographia* 624B (AM 6218) (de Boor 1883, 405–6); Foss 1996b, 114; Mango 2005, 31–32.

⁸⁵ The rebuilding of the walls by Leo III (717–41) is commemorated in an inscription. Schneider 1943, 1–2; Foss 2003, 252.

⁸⁶ Spalato/Split and Felix Romuliana/Gamzigrad are not taken into consideration, as they were inhabited by “retired” emperors, Diocletian and Galerius respectively.

⁸⁷ <http://galeriuspalace.culture.gr/en/> [accessed 1 October 2018]. Of the size or layout of the palace in Nicomedia, nothing is known. The same is true for the palace of Milan, which is thought to have been located in the western part of the city, near the circus (Duval 1978, 137–38). The palace in Sirmium has little to distinguish it from an elite villa, and Noel Duval has disputed that the building excavated to the south of the city’s hippodrome was indeed the location where the emperor resided (Duval 1978, 129–30). The palace at Serdica is believed to have occupied an area of at least 150 by 150 m in the southeastern area of “Old Serdica,” where currently the Church of St. George still stands (Kirin 2000, 269–333; De Sena 2014). Although the presence of several “palatial features,” including a bath complex and a basilica dated to the time of Constantine, makes it possible that this was the palace of Galerius and later Constantine who resided here intermittently between 316 and 323 and again between 328 and 330, as at Sirmium, concluding evidence has not yet been unearthed. The palace at Antioch was located on an island in the river Orontes, but its internal layout again remains unknown (Saliou 2000; Dey 2015, 34–38). Of the palatial complex of Trier, built for Constantius Chlorus (293–306) and used by Constantine between his coronation in 306 and 316, certain components are known, including an imperial bath house in the south, a circus in the southeast and a well-known basilica, the brick-built audience hall, in the north (Dey 2015, 45). The location of the residential quarters, adjoining the basilica, is known, but their internal layout and rooms are not.

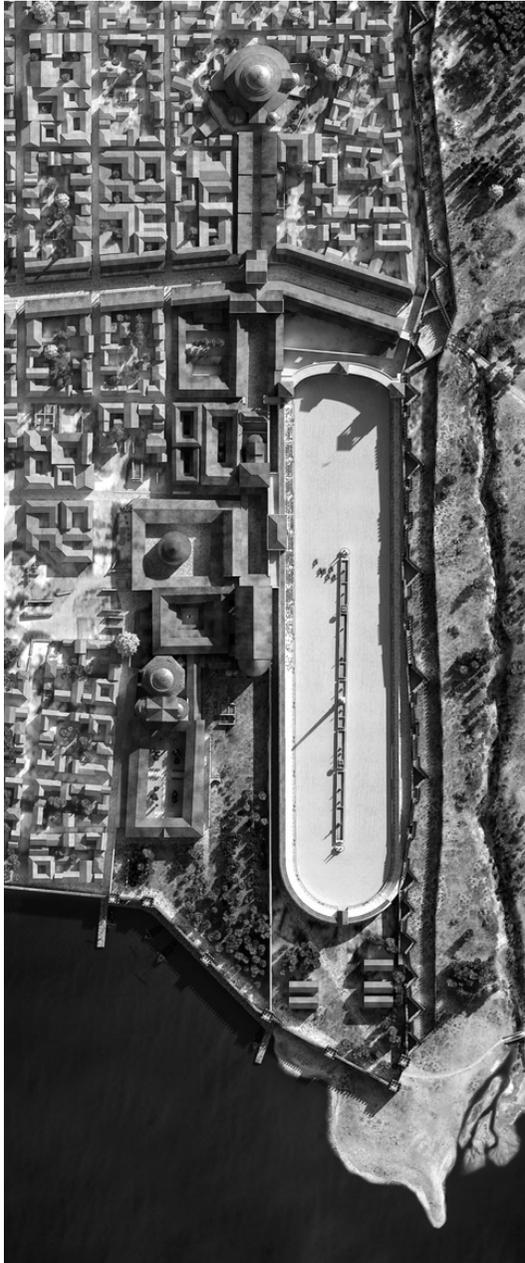


FIGURE 4.3 The Galerian complex at Thessaloniki (reconstruction) (© Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki City). Used with permission.

the west or continue southwards into the imperial premises. The most northern element of the palace proper was an apsidal building, possibly a triclinium, which opened up to another porticoed courtyard with the basilical audience hall at its other end. West of the basilica, the oldest part of the complex was located. This so-called Central Building Complex, which had at its core remains of luxurious houses dating to the second and third centuries AD, measured 30 by 40 m, consisted of a squarish courtyard with a fountain in the middle and [flanking] rooms on three sides. These rooms were surrounded by a mosaic-decorated corridor that connected this residential area to the basilica in the east, the "Octagon" and palace baths and presumably also the main entrance into the complex from the sea in the south, and the "Centrally Planned Building" in the north. Constantine is known to have resided in this palace for two years, in 323–4, and to have been involved in local projects.⁸⁸

Although in the past it has been questioned if other imperial residences possessed the same elements, and even though the extent of our knowledge on palaces elsewhere remains limited, there is now general consensus that a set of "palatial" features was present in all of them. These include large dimensions, the arrangement of palace components along a central axis, and the presence of multiple apsidal spaces, including reception halls and dining rooms, as well as a central peristyle courtyard.⁸⁹ That being said, luxurious private houses that did not serve as imperial residences but belonged to extremely wealthy landowners, the leading elite of cities, or magistrates in the imperial administration, possessed many of the same features, including impressive entrances, grand reception rooms, and dining halls provided with apses, a central peristyle, luxurious decoration, and multiple fountain features.⁹⁰ Admittedly, the scale of most of these complexes was less impressive than that of imperial residences, but the ongoing discussion about whether or not the villas in Serdica and Sirmium were used by the emperor or not already indicates that scale was not always indicative.⁹¹

THE COUNCIL HALL: A BASILICA OR ROTUNDA?

There have not been many attempts to reconstruct the shape of the hall in which the council eventually took place as there is not much information

⁸⁸ Athanasiou et al. 2013, 11.

⁸⁹ Uytterhoeven 2007a, 33.

⁹⁰ The vast literature on this topic has been assembled in Uytterhoeven 2007a and 2007b. See also Özgenel 2007.

⁹¹ Uytterhoeven 2007a, 34, for other complexes where it is not clear whether or not they belonged to an emperor.



FIGURE 4.4 The so-called throne room in Trier (Wikimedia Commons, author: Pudelek (Marcin Szala)).

to go on. Eusebius only indicated the location of the space but did not explicitly comment on practical aspects such as shape or size. Scholars have generally assumed that the council met in a rectangular hall, presumably based on the seat arrangement as described by Eusebius: “Many tiers of seating had been set along either side of the hall,” so that the emperor “walked along between them [the assembled bishops],” and “When he reached the upper end of the rows of seats and stood in the middle, a small chair made of gold having been set out.”⁹² The situation imagined is that of half of the bishops along one long end of a hall, the other half seated opposite them and the emperor at the end, opposite the entrance.

Such an arrangement in a rectangular hall is certainly possible. All imperial palaces, as well as other luxurious residences, possessed a basilical reception hall intended to receive foreign delegations, guests, and clients (Fig. 4.4). These reception halls often were the most sizeable spaces within a complex. Of those with known locations, most are situated close to the main entrance and thus the street, so that they were easily accessible to outsiders who were not permitted to see the rest of the residence.⁹³ At first sight, this does not coincide with Eusebius’s comment that the hall was the “very innermost hall of the palace.” However, as mentioned above, when the bishops were invited to Constantine’s palace in Nicomedia, here also the bishops were allowed

⁹² Eus., *VC* 3.10.1–5 (trans. Cameron and Hall 1999, 125).

⁹³ Özgenel 2007, 252–53.

into the “innermost” courtyards, after having passed the guards at the entrance. It is very possible that Eusebius’s usage of “innermost” did not mean more than simply “inside the imperial complex.”

The second possibility, argued at length by Cyril Mango, is that the council took place not in a rectangular hall, but in a centrally planned space. His interpretation follows from the assumption that the meeting hall was turned into a church dedicated to the Holy Fathers.⁹⁴ The church was in existence by the eighth century at the latest, as it was visited by the Anglo-Saxon pilgrim Willibald at some point between 727 and 729, and it is mentioned again in the ninth-century *Chronicle of Theophanes*.⁹⁵ This church collapsed during the earthquake that struck Nicaea in 1065,⁹⁶ but was rebuilt and converted into a monastery,⁹⁷ which may have been the setting of another ecclesiastical council in 1232. A church dedicated to the Holy Fathers was shown to a Latin delegation in 1234. Finally, a thirteenth-century epigraphic description of the monastery mentions that the complex, which housed forty-two monks, twelve priests, and twenty-four deacons, occupied a plot of land of about 25 by 45 m (or 1125 m²).⁹⁸

This Church of the Holy Fathers, and hence also the original meeting hall, appears to have been centrally planned. This can be concluded based on one reading of Willibald’s comparison between the Church of the Holy Fathers at Nicaea and the Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem that he had previously visited.⁹⁹ His description makes it possible to imagine either a domed octagon or rotunda with an oculus in the centre. Alternatively, it has been suggested that the rotunda described by Willibald was only part of a larger complex, functioning maybe as a baptistery, a martyr’s tomb, or a memorial attached to a basilica that had hosted the council.¹⁰⁰

Centrally planned halls were not common within private villas, although they are not entirely unknown either.¹⁰¹ The imperial residence at Thessalonica had two centrally planned halls. The first, the “Centrally Planned Building,” was located to the north of the imperial apartments. Only its foundations have been recovered, but they indicate

⁹⁴ Foss 1996a, 111–14.

⁹⁵ Mango 2005, 28–29.

⁹⁶ Foss 1996a, 112.

⁹⁷ Mango 1994, 354–56.

⁹⁸ Foss 1996a, 111–13; Mango 2005, 33.

⁹⁹ Foss 1996a, 111–14; Mango 2005, 27–28.

¹⁰⁰ Foss 1996a, 113–14.

¹⁰¹ For instance, the villa at Centcelles (Hispania Tarraconensis) possessed two rooms with a square exterior plan but round interior. The famous Centcelles mosaic covered the dome of a room with exterior dimensions of 15.24 by 15.24 m (Puche and López 2017, 173).

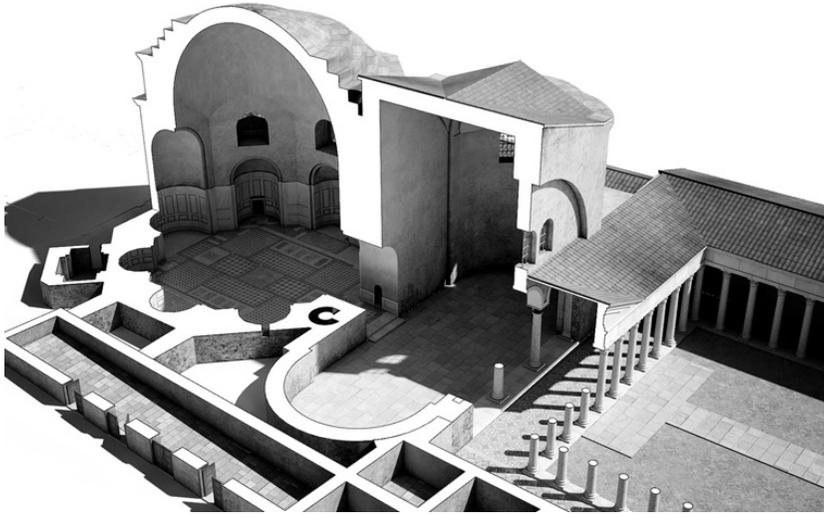


FIGURE 4.5 The Octagon in the Galerian complex at Thessaloniki (axonometric section, graphic reconstruction) (© Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki City). Used with permission.

a circular structure with a diameter of *c.* 29 m (=660 m²), situated in the centre of a courtyard. The position of this structure indicates it was probably accessible from the courtyard in between the apsidal building and the basilical audience hall. In other words, it was located in the innermost area of the complex, separated from the imperial apartments, though still accessible from them. Its function, however, remains unknown. The second centrally planned hall at Thessalonica, the “Octagon,” is better preserved (Fig. 4.5).¹⁰² Its form, location, and decoration have led scholars to presume that this was another audience hall or a throne room. The structure was begun under Galerius, but construction continued when Constantine resided in Thessalonica. The marble floor and wall decoration were probably only installed by the end of the fourth century. It possessed seven semi-circular niches, with the largest one, where presumably the emperor took his place, located opposite the entrance in the south. The hall itself was fronted by a monumental vestibule and a spacious peristyle courtyard, from which one could probably access the sea front. In other words, this hall was far removed from the main palace entrance used by visitors coming from the centre of

¹⁰² <http://galeriuspalace.culture.gr/en/monuments/oktagono/> [accessed 1 October 2018].

Thessalonica, but easily accessible for visitors arriving by water. Interestingly, this Octagon eventually was also converted into a Christian church, possibly in the second half of the fifth century. Overall though, centrally planned structures were used more often for mausolea than as actual living spaces.

In the end, the theory of a centrally planned council hall is based on a combination of two assumptions: the conversion of the hall into the Church of the Fathers and the description of Willibald as pertaining to the Church itself and not to one of its annexes. The only contemporary source is Eusebius's description, which remains more difficult to reconcile with a round seating plan than with a rectangular one.

As with the original shape, the size of the council hall also remains unknown, but we can try to reconstruct the minimal square meters necessary to accommodate an assembly of Nicaea's size. There are no guidelines as to what constituted a comfortable seating arrangement, but if we assume that some 400 ecclesiastics attended, which is a generous estimate, each of them occupying a space of minimum 0.50 and maximum 0.70 m, in rows that were separated by a comfortable distance of 1 m, the rows on each side of the hall separated by a central aisle of 4 m, and leaving ample space (2 m) between the rows and the short walls, we would end up with an interior space of 24 by 14 to 32 by 14 m (336 to 448 m²).¹⁰³ In comparison, the imperial basilica in Thessalonica measured 24 by 67 m on the exterior (1608 m²), and that in Trier was very similar in size, 26 by 67 m (1742 m²).¹⁰⁴ Both were thus far larger than what would have been needed. The projected size of the council hall is more comparable to the basilical hall in a luxurious residence such as Piazza Armerina, which was about 12 by 30 m (360 m²). The basilical halls in other, more standard private residences were somewhat smaller, with lengths nearer to 10 m and occupying often about half of the surface.¹⁰⁵

In the second scenario, that of a centrally planned council location, we would need a space with a diameter of some 21 to 24 m to end up with a usable floor surface comparable in size. At Thessalonica, both central halls were large enough to host several hundred people at the same time. The dome of the Octagon has a diameter of 23 m, and the second circular hall had a diameter of 29 m. Both the projected rectangular hall and the

¹⁰³ To compare: Vitruvius, *De architectura* 5.6.3, recommends a seat depth of 0.6–0.7 m. Rose 2005, on the basis of markings on the seats of the theatre at Arles as well as a study of modern stadia, arrived at an average seat width of only 0.4 m.

¹⁰⁴ Athanasiou et al. 2013, 40.

¹⁰⁵ Özgenel 2007, 252–53.

rotunda would have fit within the monastic compound that housed seventy-eight people as mentioned in the thirteenth-century inscription.

CHRISTIAN MEETING PLACES IN CONSTANTINIAN TIMES

From the previous discussion, it has become clear that the Nicene council hall had no direct relation to contemporary church architecture.¹⁰⁶ The conversion of the palace hall, basilical or centrally planned, into a church happened only after the actual event, at a date that remains unknown. The first attestation of the church only dates back to the eighth century. 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. As mentioned, the evidence for a Christian community at Nicaea is very limited.¹⁰⁷ The signs for church construction under the reign of Constantine and his sons in the region of Asia Minor overall are thin, and most of the evidence comes from literary sources.¹⁰⁸ Constantine is said to have restored the cathedral church in Nicomedia,¹⁰⁹ whereas we do not know of any similar interventions in Nicaea.

Instead, the organisation of the council inside a private residence, imperial or not, was very much in line with the initial gatherings of Christians in houses with the house owner presiding over the meeting.¹¹⁰ We do not know much about the very earliest of these meeting places, as they are undistinguishable in the archaeological record. From the third century onwards, the designated spaces were physically altered into *domus ecclesiae*, rectangular halls probably with a dais at one end, large enough to host growing Christian communities. Such spaces must have existed in all cities of the Roman empire. The most famous example of a *domus ecclesiae* is that of Dura Europos, established c. 240–41 at the very eastern border of the empire. The adaptation of the Lullingstone villa

¹⁰⁶ See for instance Ward Perkins 1954; Krautheimer 1979; White 2017, on the development of church architecture in the Constantinian period.

¹⁰⁷ The city had its own bishop, but in this period a bishop's presence does not say anything about the existence of public Christian architecture. Rapp 2005, 24–55, discusses the role of bishops in the first centuries of Christianity.

¹⁰⁸ The number of Constantinian churches in Asia Minor attested by archaeological evidence can be counted on one hand, although this low figure may be a consequence of the fact that excavations have stayed limited to city centres, whereas the earliest churches may have been built in the cemeteries or *necropoleis* (Niewöhner 2016, 300).

¹⁰⁹ See n. 56.

¹¹⁰ White 1996–97; Adams 2015.

(England) for Christian services dates to the second half of the fourth century. Both halls were large enough to host a few dozen faithful.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Council of Nicaea opened a new era in the history of Christianity, but many details of its physical organisation come across as improvised and impractical. Constantine himself appears to have been responsible for most of this, as his personal involvement caused the transfer from Ancyra to the northwest of Asia Minor and determined the setting of the event in a private residence. Christianity's newly found position and prestige under Constantine created new needs for which novel architectural solutions would eventually be found. But for the time being, both Christian architecture and church hierarchy were still developing. The setting of the council was not novel at all, but very much in line with both existing imperial protocol and the traditional settings of Christian gatherings.

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