

# NICEA'S UNDERWATER BASILICA

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**T**he ancient city of Nicea in modern Turkey is well known in Christian circles as the place from which an early and important statement of faith was issued: the Nicene Creed. However, the modern city of Izmir located at the ancient site is better known for its famous ceramic tiles: Izmir Çini (tiles), which have gained world renown for their quality and value.<sup>1</sup>

The first colony at Nicea, established by the Macedonians at an unknown date, was destroyed by some of the indigenous residents, the Mysians. Later in 311 B.C.E., Antigonus Monophthalmus, a successor of Alexander the Great, reestablished the city and named it Antigoneia. After Antigonus's defeat in 301 B.C.E., the city was captured by Lysimachus and renamed Nicea, after his recently deceased wife.

**SUBMERGED CHURCH.** Off the shores of modern Izmir (ancient Nicea), a late-fourth- or early-fifth-century basilica lies submerged 6–10 feet underwater. Divided into three aisles with an apse on its eastern end, the basilica served as a Christian church. It was likely built overtop an earlier church, which may be the location where the Council of Nicea first met in 325 C.E.



# ATER





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In 72 B.C.E., Nicaea, along with the kingdom of Bithynia (in northwestern Turkey), was taken by the Romans. Nicaea became the provincial capital (metropolis), and the city flourished. In 120 C.E., the city was destroyed by an earthquake, after which the emperor Hadrian assisted in its rebuilding. Later that same century after Commodus's murder in 192 and the execution of his successor Pertinax, Nicaea supported Pescennius Niger in his imperial aspirations. When Niger was defeated by Septimius Severus in 194, Nicaea was punished. Moreover, the honorific

**MONUMENTAL ENTRY.** Lefke Gate marks the entrance to Nicaea from the west. A series of three gates, it includes a victory arch built by the Bithynian proconsul Marcus Plancius Varus during Vespasian's reign (69–79 C.E.).

titles “metropolis” and “neokoros” (the guardian of an imperial temple) were removed from Nicaea's inscriptions and given to their rival Nicomedia.

In 258 the Goths plundered and set fire to Nicaea. In response, Nicaea's walls were refortified on a massive scale and expanded. Although the earlier Hellenistic walls have entirely disappeared, some of the early Roman walls were incorporated into the later, larger walls surrounding the city. Measuring 16–23 feet thick, these new walls had more than 100 towers along their 3-mile length, and they still stand to a height of 33–43 feet. The new walls were attached to two victory arches on the north (Istanbul Gate) and west (Lefke Gate), dating from the time of Vespasian (69–79 C.E.), by Bithynian Proconsul Marcus Plancius Varus. The result was the existence of four monumental gates—on the north, east, south, and west—three of which are still visible today.

The emperor Constantine consolidated his power with victories over Licinius in 324 C.E., thus







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**ENCIRCLING NICEA.** After the Goths burned Nicaea in 258, the city reinforced and augmented its walls. The new massive walls—16–23 feet thick—stretched 3 miles and boasted more than 100 towers. Today portions of these walls and towers still stand 33–43 feet tall.

establishing himself as sole ruler of the Roman Empire. Thereupon, he turned his attention to consolidating the Christians within the empire. The Edict of Milan in 313 C.E., jointly issued by Constantine and Licinius, granted religious toleration for the practice of Christianity within the empire, but theological debates regarding the nature of Jesus threatened to split the Church.

Arius, a priest from Alexandria, Egypt, espoused the belief that Jesus was a created being. According to Arius, Jesus was divine but limited in power and knowledge. Opponents of Arius argued that this reintroduced polytheism and undermined the significance of Jesus's work. The dispute embroiled the Church in such discord that Constantine called a council of Church leaders and theologians to Nicaea in order to discuss the matter and to unite the Church on the issue. In 325 C.E., more than 300 bishops from across the Mediterranean world came

to Nicaea (Athanasius claimed the number was 318) and assembled for discussions in the main hall of the imperial palace and the nearby church. These discussions and debates may have lasted for as many as three months (from May to August).

Eusebius of Caesarea recounted the inaugural event: "The most eminent servants of God from all the churches that filled Europe, Africa, and Asia gathered together, and one place of worship, as if expanded by God, accommodated the people."<sup>2</sup> Sometime later, at the end of the debates and discussions, Constantine gathered together all of the participants in the central hall of the palace in order to reach a resolution on the issue. Their consensus: Jesus was *not* a created being, and Arius's belief (Arianism) was declared a heresy.

Eusebius's account details two places where the meetings convened. The first, described as a place of worship, was too small to hold the participants—although they somehow managed to fit. The second place, used during the final proceedings, was part of Constantine's palace complex; it was larger and seemed to have sufficient space for the people. Eusebius described the central hall as the largest in the palace.<sup>3</sup>



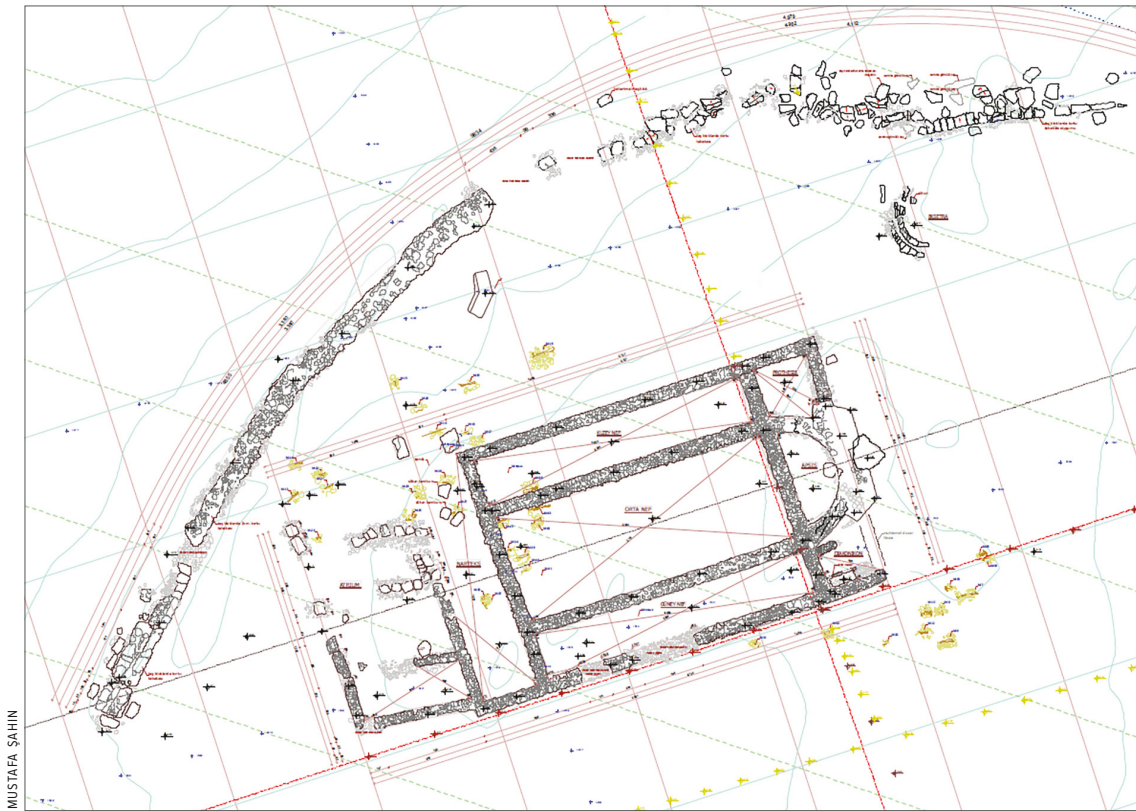
Today the remains of Constantine's palace are few. Perched on the shore, a small arrangement of foundation stones jutting out into Lake Iznik (ancient Lake Askanios) marks the spot where it once stood. In the past, a sign described the location, but today even that has disappeared.

In 2014, an ancient basilica was discovered underwater in Lake Askanios about 350 feet south

**COUNCIL OF NICEA.** This 16th-century icon depicts the First Council of Nicea, which the Roman emperor Constantine I (seated in the middle) convened. In 325 C.E., Constantine summoned to Nicea more than 300 Christian bishops from Asia, Europe, and Africa to settle the theological debate of whether Jesus was a created being (Arianism) or not. This icon comes from the collection of the Hilandar Monastery in Athos, Greece.







**BASILIC REMAINS.** This drawing shows the remains of Nicea's late-fourth- or early-fifth-century basilica, which likely was built over an earlier fourth-century church and an even earlier cemetery.

of Constantine's palace by Professor Mustafa Şahin of Uludağ University. The basilica lies 6 or 10 feet underwater about 165 feet offshore. It was built outside the city walls. After an underwater survey under the direction of Professor Şahin between June and August 2015, an underwater excavation began, led by Şahin under the auspices of the Iznik Archaeology Museum and its director, Haydar Kalsen.

Professor Şahin and his staff have turned up several important discoveries. The basilica was evidently an early Christian church with three aisles and a central apse that faced the east. Excavations in the central nave indicate that the floor was originally 1.6 feet lower than the walls of the existing building, which may suggest that the church was built upon an earlier structure. This floor had no stone or mosaic paving, indicating that the earlier structure had an earthen or wooden floor.

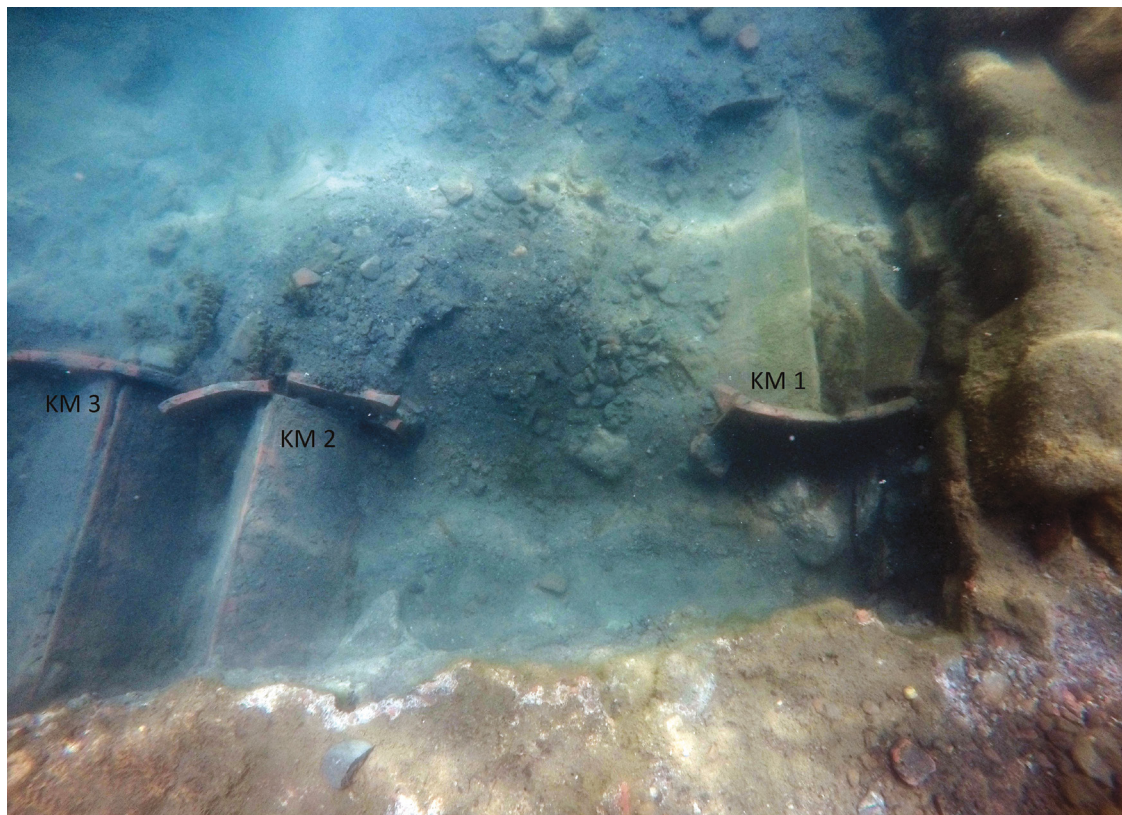
The team discovered eight tile graves, seven in the central nave and one in the apse. A 13-by-13-foot section of the northeast corner of the nave near the apse was excavated, and the first five graves were

found there next to the wall of the apse. The graves were constructed using terracotta tiles to frame the tombs. Grave 1 contained the skeletal remains of a middle-aged adult along with a child approximately five years of age. Grave 2 contained the remains of an infant. Remains from the third grave were scattered, but the grave seems to have contained an adult and two children: a three-year-old and a one-year-old. The skeletal remains of the fourth grave, which held an adult male, were the most complete and best preserved. The fifth grave has not yet been excavated. The remains of the sixth and seventh graves were largely destroyed and could not be identified. The eighth grave lies almost entirely under the wall of the apse and remains unopened.

The far eastern ends of the third and fourth graves, along with the eighth grave in the apse, were partially buried by the church wall that separated the nave from the bema. This indicates that the church was constructed over an earlier necropolis. Was the church built on this spot to commemorate the burial place of a saint, possibly an early martyr? Perhaps this is why the church was constructed outside of the southwestern walls of the city. (A city's necropolis was always outside of its walls.)

A late Byzantine tradition claims that St. Neophytos was martyred in Nicea during the reign of





MUSTAFA SAHIN

**UNDERWATER  
NECROPOLIS.**  
Eight tile graves—  
three of which can  
be seen above—were  
found beneath the  
church's central  
nave and apse. Ter-  
racotta tiles frame  
the graves, which  
held the remains of  
individuals of vari-  
ous ages. The best-  
preserved skeleton,  
an adult male, came  
from the fourth grave  
(pictured right).



MUSTAFA SAHIN



**GRAVE COINS.** Found at graves beneath the church's bema wall, these coins date to the time of Emperor Valens (364–378) and Emperor Valentinian (378–383). The Valens coin (upper) depicts Valens on its front; its reverse shows the emperor holding a *labarum* (imperial standard) while dragging a captive. The lower coin depicts Valentinian II on one side and the goddess Roma seated with a globe and spear on the other.



MUSTAFA ŞAHİN

Diocletian (284–305). According to the tradition, Neophytos was slain because he refused to offer a sacrifice to the gods when the governor Decius came to the city and commanded the people to do so. The storyline in the tradition is late and legendary, but there is good reason to believe that the tradition echoes the martyrdom of Neophytos in Nicea.<sup>4</sup>

It was common for early Christians to desire burial near the tombs of saints and martyrs. These places became sites for memorials, as well as places for worship. This may account for the reason this church was built not only outside of the city walls of Nicea, but also over a burial site. Several coins found at the graves date from the time of Emperor Valens (364–378) and Emperor Valentinian (378–383).



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**PANTOCRATOR TOKEN.** Christ sits on a throne—in the Pantocrator (“ruler of all”) pose—on this token. His right hand is raised in a blessing, and his left hand holds a copy of the scriptures. Uncovered by archaeologists near Nicea’s basilica, the token has a diameter of 1.5 inches and dates to the fifth or sixth century.

The archaeologists suggest that the graves surrounded the tomb of Neophytos. From the excavations, it appears that the existing church was constructed during the late fourth or the early fifth century. In September 2017, a votive token was found in the lake’s sediment next to the church. Dated to the fifth or sixth century, the reddish-brown terracotta token is 0.2 inches thick and 1.5 inches in diameter. While the token’s reverse side is blank, the obverse displays a seated Christ Pantocrator on a throne. The figure’s left hand holds a copy of the scriptures on his lap, and the right hand is lifted offering a blessing. The presence of the token at the church is evidence that the church was a place of Christian pilgrimage.

However, the question remains: Was this church built upon the ruins of an earlier church?

As noted, the floor of the basilica’s nave was 1.6 feet lower than its walls, and the lower floor was earthen or wooden, which may suggest that an earlier church lies below the basilica. If so, could this be the “place of worship” mentioned by Eusebius?

After the Edict of Milan (313 C.E.), Christianity became a legal religion in the Roman Empire, and Christians emerged from being part of an underground movement. At that time, churches began to be constructed throughout the empire. Formerly, the Christians had met secretly in house churches. Now

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way to prove the existence of Joseph or that Amenhotep III was the pharaoh of the Bible.

‘Abdiel’s title “Father of the God (King)” is intriguing. I was startled to find the same title in the Genesis story of Joseph and his brothers, translated by Stephen Mitchell, that I happened to read at around the same time: “Don’t be troubled now, and don’t blame yourselves for selling me, because God sent me ahead of you to save lives ... and he has made me a *father to Pharaoh*, and master of all his household, and ruler over all Egypt.” [Italics supplied.]

It now seems more plausible to me that ‘Abdiel was the basis for the Biblical Joseph. Although I do not believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, I have often thought that the stories had some historical basis, which is why I read **BAR**.

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## Underwater Basilica

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larger public buildings were built. In the 12 years before the Council of Nicea, was a church built at this site—possibly where Neophytos was buried?

As mentioned above, Eusebius stated that the council of Nicea in 325 initially met in a small place of worship, which “as if expanded by God, accommodated all of the people.” Later at the end of the meetings, the group met in Constantine’s large central palace hall. Constantine’s palace could not be construed as a place of worship. Moreover, Eusebius’s description of squeezing more than 300 people into this place of worship indicates that they met in a Christian place of worship much larger than a house church; it suggests they convened in a public church. As excavations proceed at the underwater church in Nicea, archaeologists may

be exposing the very church where the Council of Nicea first met. **■**

<sup>1</sup> Evidence of ceramic production at the nearby archaeological sites of Çakırca Mound, Çiçekli Mound, Karadin Mound, and Üyecik Mound has been discovered dating back to the Chalcolithic Age (roughly 5000 B.C.E.). Tiles produced here during the 15th and 16th centuries C.E. represented the pinnacle of Ottoman culture and artistry. Iznik tiles from this period have decorated more than 40 Ottoman mosques and palaces, including the Sultanahmet Mosque (better known as the Blue Mosque) and the Topkapi Palace (home of the Ottoman sultans).

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.7.1.

<sup>3</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.10.1.

<sup>4</sup> The tradition is mentioned in the 10th-century Synaxarion of the Church of Constantinople—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), pp. 244–246—and also in an 11th-century menologion from Byzantium, currently in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland (Walters Manuscript W.521, “Menologion for January”).

*zvi* was transferred to the deer. The *shu’al*, a species of which Samson captured 300 and tied fire-brands to their tails, was identified in Europe as a fox, leading Bible critics such as Voltaire to mock the notion that it would be possible to find 300 members of such a solitary loner as the fox. However, as other verses indicate, the *shu’al* of Scripture is actually the jackal, a relative of the fox that gathers in large packs. Yet because there are no jackals in Europe, people there had long transposed the name *shu’al* to the fox.

At the Biblical Museum of Natural History in Israel, the complex zoogeography of the Bible is fascinatingly reflected in the reactions of visitors to the animals on exhibit. American visitors are familiar with bears and wolves, but they tend to confuse the crocodile with the alligator. European visitors are familiar with the fallow deer but are often mystified by the mongoose. South African visitors are very familiar with many of the animals on exhibit, including the hyrax (the Biblical “coney” or “rock badger,” an animal that bewilders people from Europe and America, but which is

well known to those who have been to Cape Town), but they have never seen bears or wolves. And while everyone is familiar with the lion, cheetah, and hippopotamus, it comes as a shock to realize that these creatures used to roam wild in the Holy Land—at a time when the country was much more densely covered in forests and swamps.

Perhaps the Bible can indeed be referred to as *The Jungle Book*.—**Natan Slifkin**

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## Where Is It? (from p. 14)

**Answer: (E) Saudi Arabia**

Mada’in Saleh—a *second* rose-red city half as old as time—can be found in northwestern Saudi Arabia. Known to the ancient world as Hegra, the site thrived as a major Nabatean outpost from the end of the first century B.C.E. through the first century C.E.

For caravanners, it was an oasis in the middle of the desert—made possible by an advanced hydraulic system.

With numerous wells and canals, the city consists of a central residential area of primarily mudbrick structures surrounded by a necropolis. The Nabateans carved more than 100 elaborate tombs from the region’s sandstone. Qasr al-Farid, the site’s largest tomb, is pictured on p. 14.

Mada’in Saleh resembles the famous site of Petra (ancient Raqmu, the Nabateans’ capital), located in Jordan. Both functioned as outposts along the lucrative spice route. Not only was Mada’in Saleh the Nabateans’ southernmost settlement, but it was also its second-largest city.

Inscriptions and cave paintings attest to a pre-Nabatean presence at the site, but Mada’in Saleh was not extensively settled before the Nabateans. In 106 C.E., the Romans annexed Nabatea, gaining control of Mada’in Saleh. They prioritized water trade routes over land routes, which decreased the caravan trade and gradually led to the site’s desertion.

In 2008, it became Saudi Arabia’s first UNESCO World Heritage Site.