

EXCERPT



The Underwater Basilica of Nicaea
Archaeology in the Birthplace of Christian Theology

November 5, 2024 | \$40, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1067-9

In 2014, aerial photography revealed a structure that appeared to be in the shape of a basilica submerged beneath Lake Iznik, near the ancient city of Nicaea. Including excavation images and dig site maps, biblical scholar and archaeologist Mark Fairchild's work reveals what he argues is likely the location of the First Council of Nicaea.

A Firsthand Look at a Groundbreaking Archaeological Discovery

In 2014 a submerged structure was discovered near the eastern shore of Lake Iznik in modern-day Iznik, Turkey. While most Western Christians today may be unfamiliar with Iznik, they certainly will recognize the city's ancient name—Nicaea. This structure had gone unnoticed for centuries, but as water levels began dropping in the lake, aerial photography revealed a shocking discovery. This was no ordinary civic structure. The nave, aisles, and the apse pointing east suggested that this building was a basilica church.

The location of the structure evoked a great deal of interest. Nicaea was the site of the First Ecumenical Council, where Christians from across the Mediterranean world gathered together to debate issues that threatened to divide the church into factions. The first and arguably the most important ecumenical council for the Christian faith took place on the shores of Nicaea in 325, called by the newly converted emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. Over the next 450 years, seven of these councils convened in western Anatolia (modern Turkey) to unite the church. The first and the last of these met in Nicaea. These councils were so important that the brightest and best early Christian theologians and leaders traveled upward of a thousand miles to attend these meetings. In spite of the difficulties of ancient travel, hundreds made the journey.

Although several Byzantine churches have been discovered in Iznik, the meeting place, or church, of the council has never been discovered. News of the discovery quickly spread throughout the archaeological world and the media seized on the story. The attention brought about a swift response from Turkish authorities, who quickly appointed a director of excavations and a team of archaeologists. Work on the project commenced in 2015.

Authorities at the Iznik Museum and the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism assigned the task of investigating the structure to Professor Mustafa Şahin. I first became involved with the project in 2017 when Professor Şahin asked me to collaborate with him on research for the structure. I had been doing research in Turkey over the past twenty years and had traveled to over four hundred ancient sites dating back to the Greek, Roman, and Byzantine periods. A large number of these sites had churches constructed during the Byzantine period. My work in eastern Turkey involved work in some of the earliest basilica churches. In 2018 we jointly published a preliminary report on the work for the *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Mustafa Şahin and Mark R. Fairchild, "Nicaea's Underwater Basilica," *BAR* 44, no. 6 [November-December 2018]: 30-37, 61). In 2022, Huntington University gave me a sabbatical, which coincided with a Fulbright Senior Research Grant I received for the 2021–2022 year. During that time, I spent six months in Turkey working on the structure and historical sources related to it.

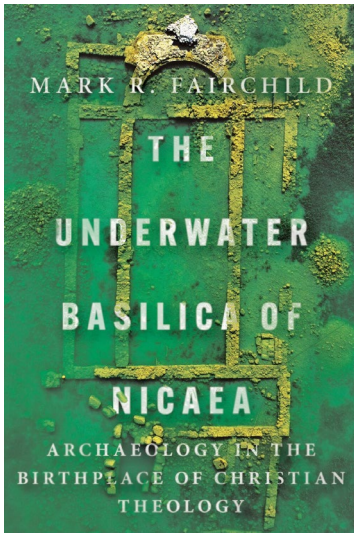
The Fulbright grant gave me an opportunity to research source materials regarding Nicaea, the history and archaeology of early Christian basilicas, and early martyrions in Anatolia, as well as to examine the seasons of excavations at the underwater basilica. Additionally, I was able to interact with faculty and students at Uludağ University and to offer lectures at Uludağ and elsewhere in Turkey. During that time my research focused on three questions: First, was the underwater structure originally a temple dedicated to Apollo? This theory has been pursued by Professor Şahin and has been promoted in a number of publications.



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Second, was the underwater structure a martyrion memorializing a Nicaean martyr? A Nicaean tradition holds that a young man named Neophytos was executed at the beginning of the fourth century and that the basilica was constructed to mark the spot of his execution. And third, was the underwater structure a basilica where the historic Council of Nicaea took place? The place of the council has vexed scholars and some have suggested that a church did not exist in Nicaea at the time of the council. The answers to all three of these questions could prove to be yes. Alternately, the answers to all three of these questions could be no. This volume will assess the strengths and weaknesses of these issues.

Nicaea was a beginning. It was a beginning of Christian theology with an imperial endorsement. It was a beginning for the faith as it emerged from the secrecy of an underground movement and became an unabashedly professed belief. It was an important beginning for what was later to become the most widely embraced faith in the world.

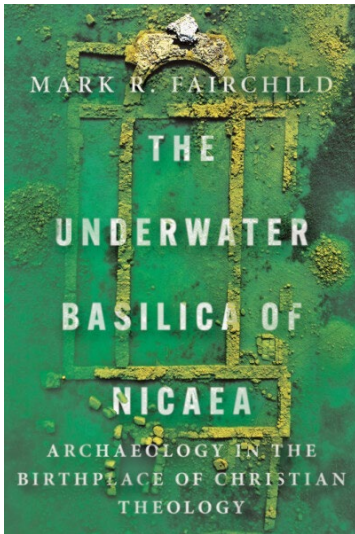
—Adapted from the introduction



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Mark R. Fairchild (PhD, Drew University) was professor of Bible and Religion at Huntington University. He spent over twenty years doing research in ancient Anatolia and worked with Mustafa Sahin to direct the excavation of the submerged Basilica. He is author of *Christian Origins in Ephesus and Asia Minor* (Hendrickson).

The Heart of Nicaea: Christian Legacy

“Building on the historical and archaeological records, Fairchild sets out an insightful case for the site of Nicaea’s Council. Readers are drawn to sift the tantalizing evidence for themselves as Fairchild gathers it from ruins below Lake Iznik and the remnants of the Church’s earliest records. He gives readers a detailed look at the development of this early Christian basilica and its possible role as the site where the young faith hammered out her orthodox creed and convictions. A thought-provoking read for scholars and students alike.”

—**David Maltsberger**, retired professor of biblical studies at Wayland Baptist University in Plainview, Texas

“This is an excellent study of the recent archaeological discovery of an underwater basilica at the site of Nicaea in modern northwestern Turkey. The real strength of the book is integrative: Dr. Fairchild adeptly weaves history and archaeology to help the reader understand the importance of Nicaea in the early history of the church. Dr. Fairchild’s work is masterful in demonstrating how archaeology sheds light on this most critical site in antiquity. This book is a good read for anyone interested in Nicaea as an early setting for the development of Christian theology.”

—**John D. Currid**, professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Dallas

“Mark Fairchild invites readers not only to explore an important archaeological site but also to enter into the circumstances and challenges Christians faced in Nicaea and its environs for the centuries leading up to one of the most significant landmark moments in the articulation of Christian theology. Readers of this book will come away with a deep appreciation for the legacy of the Christians of the first three centuries after Christ’s death and resurrection, as well as a thorough immersion into the challenges of archaeological work and the interpretation of its findings.”

—**David A. deSilva**, Trustees’ Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Greek at Ashland Theological Seminary and author of *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity*

“As the 1700-year anniversary of the Nicene Creed approaches, Mark Fairchild delivers a volume that opens up the material culture of fourth-century Nicaea. In this work with the feel of ‘notes from the field,’ Fairchild guides the reader to the heart of Nicaea (Iznik) itself and to an enigmatic underwater structure on Lake Iznik whose origin and function remain unanswered. Fairchild’s expertise and close investigation of the submerged Nicene basilica attempts some answers to its presenting questions: what is the origin of this structure? Was it dedicated to a pagan god or a Christian martyr? And—most pressing for Nicene believers—did this basilica host the gathering of bishops in AD 325? Drawing on his decades of archaeological research in the ‘cradle of Christianity’ (eastern Turkey) and focusing on worship structures and inscriptions, Fairchild assembles his argument and, in the process, delivers the book’s true value for students of Nicaea in AD 325: building out in the reader’s imagination Nicaea’s geographical milieu, giving it color and dimensionality beyond doctrinal and ecclesiological texts.”

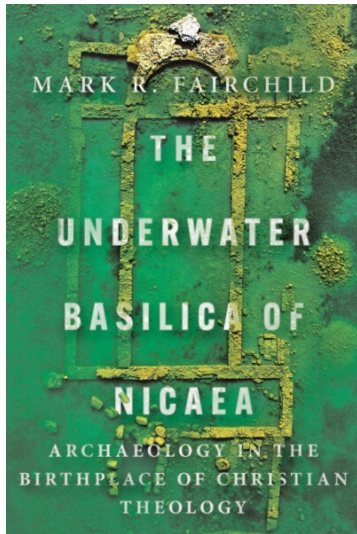
—**Stefana Dan Laing**, associate professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School at Samford University



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“Owing to his expertise after decades of research in Turkey during the Greco-Roman and Christian eras, Mark Fairchild was invited to collaborate with the Turkish marine archaeologist Mustafa Şahin, who in 2015 discovered and has been excavating the underwater church found in a lake by ancient Nicaea. This discovery is thought to be the very church where the Council of Nicaea was held in AD 325, and Fairchild artfully guides the reader through the early written sources that inform about the church and provides a fascinating treatment of the architectural remains. This book is a major contribution that sheds light on the early chapters of church history, and is written in an engaging style.”

—**James K. Hoffmeier**, professor emeritus of Near Eastern archaeology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“This book is a wonderfully readable overview of the archaeology and history of the underwater basilica of Nicaea. It is simultaneously an accessible introduction to the history and archaeology of early Christianity in the years following the Constantinian shift. Good for students and scholars alike, *The Underwater Basilica of Nicaea* draws readers into the world of Christianity in the fourth century by addressing the major scholarly questions about the basilica, including whether it might have been the original meeting place of the First Ecumenical Council. Few books on the archaeology of early Christianity are this readable and accessible!”

—**Jordan J. Ryan**, associate professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and author of *From the Passion to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre*

“This volume represents the culmination of Mark Fairchild’s two decades of field work in Turkey exploring sites of value for Christian origins. Here he draws on collaboration experience with archaeologist Mustafa Şahin, adding a chorus of voices from primary and secondary sources to comment authoritatively on the recently discovered underwater basilica of Nicaea. Calculating from available data, the author determines that the basilica likely was constructed as a martyrion in the fourth century following the liberating Edict of Milan and entertains the question of the significance of the site for the first and most famous ecumenical council that took place in this corner of the ancient Mediterranean world.”

—**John T. Noble**, assistant director of the Franciscan Leadership Institute and chair of the theology department at Marian University



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