THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

121. Jahrgang
– August 2025 –

The Sources of Nicaea 325 and their Interpretation

Selected Issues

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The study of a historical event such as the Synod of Nicaea is directly related to the sources and their interpretation. Therefore, this article is divided into two parts. The first deals with ancient sources, their transmission, nature, scientific edition, and chronology.[1] The second part tackles some topics related to the interpretation of the sources. These issues do not aspire to exhaustiveness. They represent selected nodal aspects of the interpretation of the sources related to Nicaea. Finally, I propose two more general considerations related to hermeneutics that, in my view, need further academic attention.

1 Ancient Sources

The high significance of the Council of Nicaea was perceived by its protagonists. It was not only recognized as such *a posteriori* as is the case with many historical events. According to contemporary sources, the bishops who attended Nicaea realized that they were taking part in a crucial event. The scope of the synod, the number of bishops, and especially the presence of the emperor, a few years after persecutions, clearly showed the significance of the event. Therefore, it is surprising that contemporary sources for the proceedings of the synod itself are frustratingly scarce.

1.1 First Transmission of Ancient Sources

The "editorial work" of ancient sources related to Nicaea started in the fourth century itself. The way Eusebius, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and the Christian historians selected, quoted, and introduced the documents connected with the Council implied choices and strategies. Of course, these authors did substantial editorial work, and they did that according to their own agenda. Just to give an example,

[1] Abbreviations are taken from Siegfried M. SCHWERTNER: *IATG*^{3}. Internationales Abkürzungsverzeichnis für Theologie und Grenzgebiete, Berlin 2014; Geoffrey W. H. LAMPE: *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1989, and *Thesaurus linguae Latinae* (thesaurus.badw.de). In addition: AW = Athanasius Werke; SC = Sources chretiénnes; FNS = *Fontes Nicaenae Synodi.* The Contemporary Sources for the Study of the Council of Nicaea (304–337), ed. by Samuel FERNÁNDEZ, Paderborn 2014 (Contexts of Ancient and Medieval Anthropology, 10).

Athanasius transcribed about 80 documents in his works.[2] However, he quoted only one short, unsubstantial fragment from Eusebius of Nicomedia, the one whom he called the leader of the Arian heresy.[3] Of course, it is difficult to interpret a silence, but possibly this indicates that Eusebius' doctrine was not as shocking as Athanasius claimed, and that his leadership was political rather than theol. The systematic study of the tendencies of each one of the authors who transmitted the primary sources illuminates the interpretation of the documents.[4] In the West, it seems that Hilary of Poitiers was the only one who understood the importance of the documents.[5] He transmitted fifty-four documents connected with Nicaea and the Arian controversy.[6] As the knowledge of Greek in the West was going down, the interchange between East and West required translations of documents. Hilary was the most productive translator of documents related to Nicaea and the Arian crisis. If we consider only the translated documents of which their original text survives, we can count eight Latin translations of Greek documents[7] and five Greek translations of Latin documents.[8] Of these thirteen documents,

[2] Athanasius, *apol. Const.* 30.1–9; 31.1–7; *apol. sec.* 3.1–19.5; 21.1–35.8; 37.1–40.3; 41.1; 42.1–50.3; 51.2–4; 51.5; 51.6–8; 52.2–53.6; 54.2–5; 55.1–7; 56.2–3; 57.2–6; 58.1–4; 58.5; 59.6; 61.1–62.7; 64.1–3; 66.1–3; 67.1–4; 68.1–7; 69.2–4; 70.2; 71.6; 73.1–5; 74.1–75.6; 76.1–5; 77.1–10; 78.1–7; 79.1–4; 80.1–3; 81.1–2; 85.7; 86.2–12; 87.4–7; *decr.* 8.1–4; 33.1–17; 33.8; 34.1–4; 35.1–21; 36.1–13; 38.1–9; 39.1–2; 40.1–43; 41.1–17; 42.1–3; *syn.* 8.3–7; 10.1–12; 11.1–3; 15.3; 16.2–5; 17.2; 17.4; 17.5; 17.6; 18.4–5; 18.6–7; 19.1; 19.2; 19.2; 19.3; 19.3; 21.2–7; 22.3–7; 23.2–10; 24.2–5; 25.2–5; 26.I–X; 27.2; 27.3; 28.2–12; 30.2–10; 55.2–3; 55.4–7; *h. Ar.* 23.3; 24.1–4; 44.1–11; 81.1–14.

[3] Athanasius, *syn.* 17.2; *apol. sec.* 59.4.

[4] See *L'historiographie de l'Église des premiers siècles*, ed. by Bernard POUDERON, Paris 2001 (ThH, 114); Peter van NUFFELEN: *Un héritage de paix et de piété.* Étude sur les histoires ecclésiastiques de Socrate et Sozomène, Leuven 2004 (OLA, 142); Thomas C. FERGUSON: *The Past is Prologue.* The Revolution of Nicene Historiography, Leiden 2005 (SVigChr, 75).

[5] See Gustave BARDY: "L'Occident et les documents de la controverse arienne", in: *RevScRel* 20 (1940) 28–63 (63).

[6] Hilary, *syn.* 11; 12; 13; 14; 15; 16; 18; 19; 20; 22; 23; 24; 25; 29–30; 34; 38; 38; 84; *Trin.* 4.12–13; *coll. antiar.* A I.1; A II.1; A III.1; A IV.1; A IV.2; A IV.3; A IX.1; A IX.3; A V.1; A V.3; A VI.1; A VII.1; A VIII.1; B II.1; B II.10; B II.2; B II.3; B II.4; B II.6; B II.8; B II.ap1; B III.1; B IV.1; B IV.2; B V.1; B VI.1; B VII.10; B VII.11; B VII.2; B VII.4; B VII.6; B VII.8; B VIII.1; *in Const.* 13; 23.

[7] Arius, *Letter to Alexander,* Greek original text in Athanasius, *syn.* 16.2–5 (AW 2, 243–244); Latin translation in Hilary, *Trin.* 4.12–13 (CChSL 62, 112–114); Arius, *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia,* Greek original text in Epiphanius, *haer.* 69.6,1–7 (GCS 37, 156–157); Latin translation in Candidus, *Letter to Marius Victorinus* 2.1 (SC 68, 176–180); Eusebius of Nicomedia, *Letter to Paulinus of Tyre,* Greek original text in Theodoret, *h. e.* 1.6,1–8 (GCS NF 5, 27–29); Latin translation in Candidus, *Letter to Marius Victorinus* 2.2 (SCh 68, 180–182); Synod of Nicaea (325), *Profession of Faith,* Greek original texts in Athanasius, *decr.* 33.8 (AW 2, 30); Latin translation in Lucifer of Cagliari, *De non parcendo* 18 (CSEL 14, 247–248); Hilary, *syn.* 84 (SC 621, 390–392) and *coll. antiar.* B2 10 (CSEL 65, 150); Synod of Antioch (341), *Second Formula of Faith*, Greek original in Athanasius, *syn.* 23.2–10 (AW 2, 249–250); Latin translation in Hilary, *syn.* 29–30 (SC 621, 252–256); Synod of Sirmium (351), *Formula of Faith*, Greek original in Athanasius, *syn.* 27.2 (AW 2, 254); Latin translation in Hilary, *syn.* 38 (SC 621, 276–278); Synod of Sirmium (351), *Anathematisms*, Greek original in Athanasius, *syn.* 27.3 (AW 2, 254–256); Latin translation in Hilary, *syn.* 38 (SC 621, 278–290); Synod of Ancyra (358), *Canons*, Greek original in Epiphanius, *haer.* 73.10–11 (GCS 37, 280–284); Latin translation in Hilary, *syn.* 13–26 (SC 621, 206–244).

[8] Ursacius and Valens, *Letter to Julius*, Latin original text in Hilary, *coll. antiar.* B2 6 (CSEL 65, 143–144); Greek translation in Athanasius, *apol. sec.* 58.1–4 (AW 2, 138); Ursacius and Valens, *Letter to Athanasius*, Latin original text in Hilary, *coll. antiar.* B2 6 (CSEL 65, 145); Greek translation in Athanasius, *apol. sec.* 58.5 (AW 2, 138); Synod of Sirmium II (357), *Second Formula of Faith*, Latin original text in Hilary, *syn.* 11 (SCh 621, 198–204); Greek translation in Athanasius, *syn.* 28.2–12 (AW 2, 256–257); Synod of Rimini (359), *Letter to Constantius II,* Latin original text in Hilary, *coll. antiar.* A5 1 (CSEL 65, 78–85); Greek translation in Athanasius, *syn.* 10.1–12 (AW 2, 237–238); Synod of Rimini (359), *Synodal Decree*, Latin original text in Hilary, *coll. antiar.* A9 3 (CSEL 65, 96–97); Greek translation in Athanasius, *syn.* 11.1–3 (AW 2, 238–239).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

preserved in both original text and translation, six are found in the works of Hilary, five in those of Athanasius and two in those of Marius Victorinus (Candidus). There is no certainty as to the identity of the translator(s) from Latin into Greek of the documents preserved by Athanasius. Therefore, the bishop of Poitiers appears as the central figure in the translations made during the theol. controversy of the fourth century. The analysis of these translations shed light on the actual meaning of some terms that became technical during the controversy and afterwards.[9]

1.2 Nature of the Sources

Sources are never neutral. Their authors are somehow engaged in the events they describe. Nevertheless, some of them are more reliable than others. Indeed, it is possible to classify ancient sources into three layers that shed some light on their reliability. In general terms, it is possible to distinguish three types of primary sources: the *narratives* of the historians, the *testimonies* of the protagonists, and the *documents* contemporary to the events. (1.) The *narratives* are the most immediate level of the historical works that describe the controversies of the fourth century. They are accounts written by Christian authors of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, who did not participate in the events they narrate. They are mainly Gelasius, Epiphanius, Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, Philostorgius, and Sulpicius. These historians shaped their works within the Athanasian framework, that is, within the "master narrative" established and disseminated by Athanasius.[10] (2.) The second level is that of the *testimonies*, which are historical accounts of the controversies written some years after the events—with a retrospective viewpoint—by authors who participated in these events. These authors are mainly Eusebius and Athanasius, for the first period. As they participated in the controversies, they are privileged witnesses. Yet, the time elapsed between the events and their writings and their engagement in the controversy led them to interpret the events retrospectively and biasedly. Therefore, to assess the historical worth of these *testimonies*, it is necessary to consider the agenda of each of these authors. (3.) The most valuable texts are the *documents* contemporary to the events, which are transmitted by ancient Christian writers. They are letters, creeds, canons, theol. statements, and imperial reports. They have been transmitted as quotations, i. e., they are preserved in other works (*traditio indirecta*). The main authors transmitting documents are Eusebius, Athanasius, Hilary, Epiphanius, and the ancient Church historians. These documents are not free of bias, because their authors were engaged in the controversy. However, because they are contemporary to the events, they do not convey a retrospective view of the facts, nor are they influenced by Athanasius' account. Hans G. Opitz, in 1934–1935, published a collection of these documents, an epoch-making work.[11] However, he integrated a few retrospective accounts into his collection. For example, *Urkunde* 5, coming from Sozomen, which accounts for a synod in Bithynia

[9] See Samuel FERNÁNDEZ: "Hilario de Poitiers como traductor durante la crisis arriana", in: *Translation Dynamics in Early Christian Literature*, ed. by Vittorio BERTI/Emanuela COLOMBI/Carla NOCE, Turnhout 2025 (CCLP, 16), 407–425.

[10] The first comprehensive account of Nicaea is found in the writings of Athanasius. The bishop told the story as a staunch adversary of Arius and a committed defender of Nicaea, that is, in a biased way. His historical works were written more than twenty-five years after the council, that is, with a retrospective viewpoint, when the first reception of the council had concluded. Thanks to Athanasius' reputation, almost all Christian writers of the late fourth and fifth centuries adopted his interpretation, roughly speaking. Thus, Athanasius' account became the "master narrative."

[11] Hans G. OPITZ: *Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites*, AW 3.1, Berlin 1934.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

that supported Arius. The problem is that this short, retrospective, and problematic fragment—together with Licinius' ban on the convening of synods—has played a major role in Opitz's historical reconstruction of this period. In this case, contemporary sources are read in light of retrospective records, and not the other way around, as it should be.[12]

1.3 Editorial Status of the Sources

A word must be said about the scientific editions of primary sources. The indisputable milestone is the work by Opitz. The second vol. and the first fascicles of the third vol. of *Athanasius Werke* inaugurated a new era for the studies on Nicaea. Crucial works by Athanasius such as *De decretis Nicaenae synodis, De sententia Dionysii, Apologia de fuga sua, Apologia contra Arianos, Epistula encyclica, Epistula ad Serapionem de morte Arii, Epistula ad monachos*, and *Historia Arianorum* were edited with modern scientific standards for the first time (AW 2). In addition, the already mentioned *Urkunden* (1934–1935) edited the documents whose textual tradition presents rare philological problems. These documents have been transmitted by *traditio indirecta*, that is, cited in another work, however, some of them are cited in more than one work. For example, Eusebius' letter to his church is transmitted by four witnesses—Athanasius, Socrates, Theodoret, and the *Anonymous Church History*. Therefore, the edition of the letter must pay attention to all four works. However, when Opitz undertook the edition of AW (1935), he could use the critical editions of Theodoret (1911) and *Anonymous Church History* (1918), but he could not use the scientific edition of Socrates (1995) and the fully reworked edition of the *Anonymous Church History*, CPG 6034 (2002).[13]

In general terms, the works published by *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* provide the point of departure for further editions. A research group from Erlangen and Wien has resumed the edition of the *Athanasius Werke*. They have published AW 1 and completed AW 2.[14] In addition, the same group reworked and continued AW 3, that is, Opitz's *Urkunden*. For the first part of the controversy, this new edition studies thoroughly the chronology of the sources, adds a few documents absent from Opitz's edition, and provides a German translation.

[12] Possibly, Sozomen relied on an ancient source that speaks about a synod in Bithynia. But, in the early fourth century, the term σύνοδος could indicate a formal synod as well as another kind of meeting. Alexander and Constantine used the term σύνοδος to speak about meetings that were not "synods," see Alexander, *ep. Alex.* 36 (FNS 8.36); Constantine, *ep. Alex. Ar.* 6–8 (FNS 24.6–8). See Adolf LUMPE: "Zur Geschichte des Wortes σύνοδος in der antiken christlichen Gräzität", in: *AHC* 6 (1974) 40–53. Besides, the meaning of Licinius' laws against Christian synods is not clear, see Constantine, *ep. Alex. Ar.* 2 (FNS 24.2); Eusebius, *v. C.* 1.51,1–2.

[13] A new translation of this work is now available for English readers, cf. *Remembering Nicaea*: The Ecclesiastical History of Anonymous Cyzicenus, hg. v. Martin Shedd / Sean Tandy / Jeremy M. Schott. – Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2024. 340 S. (SBL Writings from the Greco-Roman World), geb. € 78,19 ISBN: 978-162837585. The editor of the critical edition has also published a German translation, Gelasius CYZICENUS: *Kirchengeschichte*, hg. v. Günther Christian HANSEN, Turnhout 2008 (Fontes Christiani 49).

[14] AW 1: *Epistula ad episcopos Aegypti et Libyae* (Berlin 1996); *Orationes contra Arianos* (Berlin 1998–2000); *Epistulae I–IV ad Serapionem* (Berlin 2010); *Epistulae Dogmaticae Minores* (Berlin 2016), and *Epistula ad Marcellinum* (Berlin 2021). AW 2: *Apologia ad Constantium, Epistula ad Ioannem et Antiochum, Epistula ad Palladium, Epistula ad Dracontium, Epistula ad Afros, Tomus ad Antiochenos, Epistula ad Jovianum; Jovian, Epistula ad Athanasium, Petitiones Arianorum* (Berlin 2006).

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Some recent works, among others, deserve special attention. The first is the new edition of Eustathius of Antioch's extant works.[15] His homily on 1 Kingdoms 28 is not particularly relevant for the Trinitarian discussion. In turn, the fragments of Eustathius' doctrinal works provide a unique window to some topics discussed at Nicaea. The standard edition was that of Michel Spanneut,[16] but Gilbert Declerck's new edition includes a large number of fragments published for the first time under the authorship of Eustathius. These "new" fragments come from a Greek manuscript, *Vatopedi* 236, XII–XIII century. This codex contains several fragments allegedly by Gregory of Nyssa which have been credited to Eustathius. Spanneut's collection contains 92 fragments, whereas Declerck edited 155 fragments. To my knowledge, there is no substantial monograph on Eustathius' Christology and Trinitarian theol. grounded on the new edition. This is a relevant lacuna, because he was one of the key figures of Nicaea. Besides, a brief yet insightful treatise on Easter was published for the first time in 2019. The *Liber Timothei episcopi de Pascha* is the Latin version of an otherwise lost Greek text.[17] The treatise could have been written in the last decades of the third century or the firsts of the fourth century. It provides precise information about different views on the date of Easter, a crucial topic of Nicaea. In the last years, other important steps forward have been made regarding the primary sources. In 2002, the first critical edition of the *Apologeticus pro Origene* by Pamphilus was published.[18] This work offers important information about the reception of the Origenian tradition in the years leading to Nicaea. Besides, it is likely that bishops as Marcellus of Ancyra and Paulinus of Tyre knew Origen through the anthology of this work.[19] In 2003, Alberto Camplani published an Italian translation of Athanasius' Festal letters and its index.[20] This translation, which has a substantial introduction, reconsiders the setting and chronology of these works so that this somehow neglected literary corpus sheds new light on the events leading to Nicaea. David Brakke and David M. Gwynn review this material and provide an English translation.[21] In 2004, Javier de Navascués, in his monograph on Antiochene Christianity,[22] critically reassesses the material coming under the name of Paul of Samosata and provides a new edition of the extant Greek, Syriac, Armenian, and Latin fragments of Paul of Samosata and Malchion as well as of the key indirect sources. The monograph includes a Spanish translation of the texts and a rich commentary in which the authenticity of the fragments is discussed. In 2016, the Ethiopic version of the *Historia Episcopatus Alexandriae* (HEpA)

[15] *Eustathii Antiocheni, patris Nicaeni, opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. by José DECLERCK, Turnhout 2002 (CCHG, 51).

[16] Michel SPANNEUT: *Recherches sur les écrits d'Eustathe d'Antioche.* Avec une édition nouvelle des fragments dogmatiques et exégétiques, Lille 1948 (MFCL, 55).

[17] Timothée, *Sur la Pâque*, ed. by Pierre CHAMBERT-PROTAT/Camille GERZAGUET, Paris 2019 (SC, 604).

[18] Pamphile et Eusèbe de Césarée, *Apologie pour Origène, suivi de Rufin d'Aquilée, Sur la falsification des livres d'Origène*, ed. by René AMACKER/Éric JUNOD, Paris 2002 (SC, 464).

[19] All the citations of Origen's texts by these two bishops are in Pamphilus, *apol.* with the same extension.

[20] Atanasio di Alessandria, *Lettere festali.* Anonimo, Indice delle lettere festali, ed. by Alberto CAMPLANI, Milano 2003 (LCPM, 34).

[21] *The Festal Letters of Athanasius of Alexandria.* With the Festal Index and the Historia acephala, ed. by David BRAKKE/David M. GWYNN, Liverpool 2022 (Translated Texts for Historians, 81).

[22] Patricio de NAVASCUÉS, *Pablo de Samosata y sus adversaries.* Estudio histórico-teológico del cristianismo antioqueno en el siglo III, Roma 2004 (SEAug, 87).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

was published for the first time by Alessandro Bausi and Camplani.[23] This publication is significant, because this *Historia* was only partially known through some Latin fragments preserved by the codex *Veronensis* LX (58). This work provides new clues about the Nicene historiography and the relationship between the Melitian and the Arian crisis. In the same line, in 2018, a research group led by Martin Wallraff published a reconstruction of Gelasius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*.[24] The match of different—sometimes independent—witnesses to Gelasius' work allows the editor to reconstruct the texts with various degrees of reliability. The reconstruction of this *Historia ecclesiastica* sheds light on the relationship between other Christian historians and, thus, on the first stages of the Nicene historiography. Finally, in 2021 the first critical edition of Hilary's *De synodis* appears, a crucial work for the understanding of the reception of Nicaea in the West.[25] For a long time, the standard text was that of Migne, which reproduces Scipione Maffei's edition, with some crucial typos (!).[26]

1.4 Chronology of the Documents

The relative and absolute chronology of the sources are both crucial and disputed. They are crucial, because the reconstruction of the crisis must depend on the chronological order of the documents and not *vice versa*. However, both aspects of chronology are subject to academic debate. Again, the mandatory point of departure of this topic is Hans. G. Opitz, *Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites*. Opitz's chronology has been critically reviewed by several authors. William Telfer objected to the length of the period between the beginning of the crisis and the Council of Nicaea. Instead, he proposed that Arius' confrontation with his bishop was in July 323, twenty-two months before the Great Council.[27] Wilhelm Schneemelcher, for his part, criticized Telfer's thesis and supported Opitz's chronology.[28] Rowan Williams placed the first condemnation of Arius around 321 and, in addition, proposed a new sequence for some texts.[29] Gerhard Loose reviewed Williams' proposals and confirmed some of Opitz's results.[30] The continuation of the *Urkunden*, directed by Brennecke,[31] proposed modifications to Opitz's chronology. Recently, *Fontes Nicaenae Synodi* has proposed another chronology of the sources.[32]

The main points of disagreement between the proposals are related to the absolute and the relative chronologies of the sources. Regarding the absolute one, scholars are divided between those who accept the "long chronology" of Opitz, which places the beginning of the crisis in 318, and the

[23] Alessandro BAUSI/Alberto CAMPLANI: "The History of the Episcopate of Alexandria (HEpA). Editio minor of the Fragments Preserved in the Aksumite Collection and in the Codex Veronensis LX (58)," in: *Adamantius* 22 (2016), 249–302.

[24] Gelasius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*. The Extant Fragments with an Appendix Containing the Fragments from Dogmatic Works, ed. by Martin WALLRAFF/Jonathan STUTZ/Nicolas MARINIDES, Berlin 2018 (GCS NF, 25).

[25] Hilaire de Poitiers, *Lettre sur les synodes*, ed. by Michael DURST/André ROCHER, Paris 2021 (SC, 621).

[26] See, for example, Hilary, *syn.* 89: "Mouet me cum scandalo *omousii* ambiguitas" (SC 621, 408); "Movet me cum scandalo homoeusii ambiguitas" (PL 10, 511). The key term is "homousii" in Cousant's (1693) and Maffei's (1739) editions, as in SC 621 (*homousii* = *omousii*), not "*homoeusii*" as in Migne.

[27] William TELFER: "When Did the Arian Controversy Begin?," in: *JThS* 47 (1946) 129–142.

[28] Wilhelm SCHNEEMELCHER: "Zur Chronologie des arianischen Streites", in: *ThLZ* 79 (1954) 393–400.

[29] Rowan WILLIAMS: *Arius*. Heresy and Tradition, Grand Rapids [1987] 2001, 48–81.

[30] Uta LOOSE: "Zur Chronologie des arianischen Streites", in: *ZKG* 101 (1990) 88–92.

[31] Hans C. BRENNECKE/Uta HEIL/Annette von STOCKHAUSEN/Anjelika WINTJES: *Dokumente zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites,* Berlin 2007, xix–xxxvii (AW 3.1).

[32] FNS xxiii–xxxiv.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

"short chronology" of Telfer, which places it around 323. The valuable vol. by Richard W. Burgess,[33] has provided two specific pieces of information that are crucial for the chronology of the years that preceded Nicaea. First, the succession of the bishops of Antioch was Philogonius, Paulinus, and Eustathius,[34] and not Philogonius, Eustathius, and Paulinus, as the conventional reconstruction. Second, Philogonius died on December 20, 323, not 324, as previous reconstructions affirm.[35] These pieces of evidence shed some light on the absolute chronology of the documents.

It is not possible to account for all the disagreements of scholars regarding the relative chronology of the sources. However, it seems sensible to mention three critical points. The first is the order of Alexander's letters. According to Opitz and a group of scholars, the Encyclical letter of Alexander (Urk. 4a–b/FNS 25–26) predates the long letter to the bishop of Byzantium (Urk. 14/FNS 8).[36] Instead, other scholars assert that the letter to Alexander of Byzantium (Urk. 14/FNS 8) predates his Encyclical letter with its "cover letter" (Urk. 4a–b/FNS 25–26).[37] Something similar happens with the pre-Nicene letters of Arius. Some scholars, following Opitz, support that Arius' letter to the bishop of Nicomedia (Urk. 1/FNS 6) predates that addressed to Alexander (Urk. 6/FNS 11), whereas other scholars invert this sequence.[38]

2 Reconstructing Nicaea

This second section does not aim to recount the eve and full development of the Council of Nicaea. As stated above, this part of this article focuses on selected topics related to the interpretation of the sources, which shape the various reconstructions of the council. Some passages rework material from my recent monograph on Nicaea.[39] However, rather than summarizing the contents of the book, this section seeks to present and evaluate key aspects of the history of the Nicene synod. Its purpose is to raise questions rather than provide definitive answers.

[33] Richard W. BURGESS: *Studies in Eusebian and Post-Eusebian Chronography,* Stuttgart 1999 (Hist.E, 135).

[34] BURGESS: *Studies in Eusebian and Post-Eusebian Chronography* (note 32), 184–191.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Hans G. OPITZ: "Die Zeitfolge des arianischen Streites von den Anfängen bis zum Jahre 328", in: *ZNW* 33 (1934) 131–159, esp. 146–147; LOOSE: „Zur Chronologie des arianischen Streites" (note 29), 88–92; Winrich LÖHR: "Arius Reconsidered (Part 1)," in: *ZAC* 9 (2006) 524–560, esp. 543–553; BRENNECKE/HEIL/VON STOCKHAUSEN/WINTJES, *Dokumente zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites* (note 30), xxv.

[37] Gustave BARDY: "Saint Alexandre d'Alexandrie at-il connu la Thalie d'Arius," in: *RevScRel* 7 (1926) 527–532; TELFER: "When Did the Arian Controversy Begin?" (note 26), 129–142; WILLIAMS: *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (note 28), 50–56; Josep Masana VILELLA: "Consideraciones sobre las *Urkunden* del conflicto arriano preniceno," in: *Constantino, ¿el primer emperador cristiano?,* ed. by ID., Barcelona 2015 (Publicacions i Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona), 193–217; Xavier MORALES: "Athanase a-t-il rédigé l'encyclique d'Alexandre d'Alexandrie ?," in: *RHE* 114 (2019) 541–589, esp. 552–553.

[38] The main studies that support that *Urk.* 1/FNS 6 predates *Urk.* 6/FNS 11 are Eduard SCHWARTZ: „Die Dokumente des arianischen Streits bis 325," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5. Bd., Berlin 1959, 3, 120; OPITZ: „Die Zeitfolge des arianischen Streites von den Anfängen bis zum Jahre 328" (note 35), 146–7; Rudolf LORENZ: *Arius judaizans?* Untersuchungen zur dogmengeschichtlichen Einordnung des Arius, Göttingen 1979 (FKDG, 31), 50. In contrast, other studies support that *Urk.* 6/FNS 11 predates *Urk.* 1/FNS 6: WILLIAMS: *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (note 28), 52; LOOSE: "Zur Chronologie des arianischen Streites" (note 29), 88–92; LÖHR: "Arius Reconsidered (Part 1)" (note 35), 543–53; BRENNECKE/HEIL/STOCKHAUSEN/WINTJES: *Dokumente zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites* (note 30), xxv; MORALES: "Athanase a-t-il rédigé l'encyclique d'Alexandre d'Alexandrie ?" (note 36), 585, note 205.

[39] Samuel FERNÁNDEZ: *Nicaea 325.* Reassessing the Contemporary Sources, Paderborn 2025 (Contexts of Ancient and Medieval Anthropology, 14).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

2.1 Synodal Activity Before Nicaea

The study of early synodal activity presents several critical challenges. The first is the fragmentary nature of the sources, which implies the assumption that Christian synodal activity was more extensive than the surviving evidence suggests. A second difficulty lies in the semantic range of the term σύνοδος, which can mean encounter, assembly, gathering, group, or faction. Even in the Christian Greek of the third and fourth centuries, σύνοδος did not always indicate the kind of ecclesial assemblies we have in mind today.[40] For instance, both Alexander and Constantine use σύνοδος to refer to meetings that were not technically synods in the language of the late fourth century. The third challenge is the absence of a precise definition of "synod" in the second and third centuries. Only in the fourth century did the first reflections on the nature of synods emerge.[41] This creates the risk of interpreting earlier "synods" through the lens of later definitions, leading to a retrospective understanding of them.[42] For example, Eric Junod argues that the participation of multiple communities is an essential feature of synods and, therefore, does not classify the anti-Montanist meetings described by Eusebius as true synods. Similarly, Fischer and Lumpe do not recognize Origen's debate with Heraclides as a synod, while Allen Brent considers Origen's discussion with Beryllus to be more of a phil. exchange than a synodal gathering.[43] Such interpretations, of course, depend on specific definitions of what constitutes a synod. The key issue is to avoid evaluating ecclesial gatherings of the second, third, and early fourth centuries through the framework of later synodal definitions. A careful analysis of the sources reveals that even in antiquity, determining whether certain meetings qualified as legitimate synods was a matter of debate—an issue that remains equally complex for modern scholars.

2.2 The Various Aspects of the Nicene Council

One of the challenges of the 1,700th anniversary of Nicaea is to place the synod itself at the center of discussion. The conventional historiographical tendency has been to identify Nicaea primarily with the so-called Arian crisis. The key works that have shaped the standard narrative of the council[44] focus on the Trinitarian controversy and devote far more p.s to the reception of the council than to the assembly itself. This is, of course, not a shortcoming of these outstanding studies, as their titles clearly indicate that their primary concern is not Nicaea itself. A similar observation applies to more recent

[40] See Alexander, *ep. Alex.* 3; 36 (FNS 8.3; 8.36); Constantine, *ep. Alex. Ar.* 6–7; 11 (FNS 24.6–7; 24.11).

[41] See Athanasius, *syn.* 45; Hilary, *syn.* 84–88; Vittorio PERI: "Concilium plenum et generale: La prima attestazione dei criteri tradizionale dell'ecumenicità," in: *AHC* 15 (1983) 41–78; Angelo DI BERARDINO/Basil STUDER: *Storia della teologia* 1, Casale Monferrato 1993, 452–461; Michael FIEDROWICZ: *Theologie der Kirchenväter.* Grundlagen frühchristlicher Glaubensreflexion, Freiburg 2010, 255–260; 291–301.

[42] See Alberto CAMPLANI: "Le trasformazioni del cristianesimo orientale: monoepiscopato e sinodi (II–IV secolo)," in: *ASE* 23 (2006) 67–114, esp. 67–77.

[43] See Eusebius, *h. e.* 5.14–19; Éric JUNOD: "Naissance de la pratique synodale et unité de l'Église au IIe siècle", in: *RHPhR* 68 (1988) 164–165; Joseph A. FISCHER/Adolf LUMPE: *Die Synoden von den Anfängen bis zum Vorabend des Nicaenums*, Paderborn 1997 (KonGe.D), 141–150; Allen BRENT: *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century.* Communities in Tension Before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop, Leiden 1995 (SVigChr, 31), 440–445.

[44] See Manlio SIMONETTI: *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo*, Rome 1975 (SEAug, 11); Richard P. C. HANSON: *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God.* The Arian Controversy, Edinburgh 1988, 318–381.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

works[45]. By contrast, Éphrem Boularand's two-vol. work *L'hérésie d'Arius et la "foi" de Nicée* (Paris 1972) is explicitly dedicated to Nicaea, though its focus remains the Arian controversy rather than the council itself. Moreover, its apologetic character at times limits its scholarly utility. As a result, very few academic studies directly examine the Council of Nicaea in its entirety. The exceptions include Colm Luibhéid's *The Council of Nicaea* (Galway 1982) and Henryk Pietras' *Concilio di Nicea (325) nel suo contesto* (Rome 2021), both of which seek to address the full range of issues surrounding the synod.[46] Consequently, topics such as the Nicene canons, the Melitian crisis, the date of Easter, and other disciplinary matters have largely been studied in isolation.

The Melitian crisis has received substantial scholarly attention, though not within studies focused on Nicaea.[47] Rowan Williams, however, examines the Melitian and Arian crises together in *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London 2001). A similar pattern emerges with the Nicene canons and the date of Easter—while these topics have been studied, they are not always directly connected to the council itself, despite some canons being closely linked to other Nicene issues. For instance, the canons on episcopal jurisdiction reflect specific challenges that Alexander of Alexandria addressed in Egypt concerning the ordinations performed by Melitius. Likewise, the canon regarding the status of the churches of Caesarea Maritima and Jerusalem is possibly tied to the actions of Eusebius of Caesarea and Macarius of Jerusalem.[48]

2.3 Theological Continuity Between the Third and Fourth Centuries

Many modern studies do not sufficiently emphasize the continuity between the theol. controversies of the third and fourth centuries. The conventional periodization of history—dividing ancient Christianity into pre-Nicene and post-Nicene periods—along with the classical view of the fourth century as the "Golden Age" of Patristics, has contributed to a scholarly tendency to overlook these connections. For example, Hanson's *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* begins with the teachings of Arius, with little discussion of earlier theol. developments. Similarly, the otherwise excellent *Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea* devotes little attention to the theol. antecedents of Nicaea.[49] It lacks a substantial chap. on the third-century theol. controversies and the development of synodal activity in the pre-Nicene period, while multiple chap.s focus on the

[45] Such as Lewis AYRES: *Nicaea and Its Legacy.* An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology, Oxford 2004; Khaled ANATOLIOS: *Retrieving Nicaea.* The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine, Grand Rapids 2011.

[46] The English version of this book—less developed than the Italian one—was published some years earlier, Henryk PIETRAS: *Council of Nicaea (325).* Religious and Political Context, Documents, Commentaries, Rome 2016.

[47] Duane W. H. ARNOLD: *The Early Episcopal Career of Athanasius of Alexandria*, London 1991 (CJAn, 6); Annick Martin, *Athanase d'Alexandrie et l'Église d'Égypte au IVe siècle (328–373)*, Rome 1996 (CEFR, 216); Eva WIPSZYCKA: *The Alexandrian Church.* People and Institutions, Warsaw 2015 (JJP.S, 25).

[48] See FERNÁNDEZ: *Nicaea 325* (note 38), 226–230.

[49] The articles in the *Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea,* ed. by Young R. KIM, Cambridge 2020, are of excellent quality. However, its structure appears somewhat unbalanced, as it largely neglects the antecedents of Nicaea. The vol. provides an up-to-date analysis of Nicaea and its reception, yet its organization limits attention to the theol. and historical developments leading up to the council. The *Companion* is structured into 16 chap.s, grouped into five parts. Following an introduction by Young R. Kim, Part I examines the immediate context of the Nicene synod. Part II focuses on the council itself and consists of three chap.s. Part III explores the outcomes of Nicaea, including its creed and canons. Part IV addresses the aftermath of the council up to the end of the fourth century, while Part V examines Nicaea's long-term reception.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

immediate and long reception of Nicaea. The structure of these and other works thus reinforces the perception that the Arian crisis erupted *ex abrupto*.

> In contrast, the very first words of Simonetti's monograph highlight the continuity: The Trinitarian doctrinal arguments that were at the heart of the Arian controversy were not improvised by Arius and his opponents.[50]

A thorough understanding of third-century Trinitarian theol.—particularly that of Origen—is essential for grasping the complexities of the Arian controversy. A recent exception to the frequent neglect of third-century theol. antecedents is Dragos A. Giulea's *Antioch, Nicaea, and the Synthesis of Constantinople*, which, as its subtitle indicates, reconsiders the theol. trajectories involved in the debates. Particularly noteworthy is the first chap. of Part I, *Antioch 268 and the Grammar of Individual Ousia*, which analyzes the *Letter of the Six Bishops*—a crucial yet often overlooked document that sheds light on the theol. disputes of the late third century.[51] The theol. asserted and opposed in this letter provides a valuable interpretive key for understanding the doctrinal discussions of the early fourth century.

2.4 Theological Tendencies and Models

Which theol. tendencies rooted in the third century played a significant role in the controversy leading to Nicaea? This is a challenging question, primarily due to the irregularity of the sources—some theol. currents are well-documented, while others are accessible only through the polemical accounts of their adversaries. For example, no writings by Sabellius have survived, and almost no information from his direct opponents remains.[52] As a result, Sabellianism, both in ancient Christianity and modern scholarship, is little more than a polemical label. Consequently, certain modern models for interpreting ancient theol.—such as the opposition between Logos theol. and Monarchian-Sabellian theol.—do not always align with the textual evidence.

For instance, the two-stage Logos theol. of the third century is often presented as the hallmark of anti-Sabellian theol. However, a key figure like Marcellus of Ancyra, labeled as a Sabellian by both ancient and modern scholars, shows significant continuity with a prominent representative of two-stage Christology, Hippolytus, the author of *Contra Noëtum*. Marcellus maintained that there is an eternal unity and an economical plurality between God and the Logos, that the Logos became the Son upon being born from Mary, and that the prophets and the Psalms referred to the Logos as the Son only in anticipation of the Incarnation. These assertions, in some way, were already present in Hippolytus' *Contra Noëtum* and had a distinctly anti-Sabellian character.[53] Eusebius of Caesarea accused Marcellus of Sabellianism, even calling him the "new Sabellius." However, Marcellus himself

[50] SIMONETTI: *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo* (note 43), 3.

[51] Dragos A. GIULEA: *Antioch, Nicaea, and the Synthesis of Constantinople.* Revisiting Trajectories in the Fourth-Century Christological Debates, Leiden 2024 (SHCT, 200), 23–69.

[52] The exception could be Ps. Hippolytus, the author of *Refutatio*. See Ps. Hippolytus, *haer.* 9.7–12.

[53] See Samuel FERNÁNDEZ: "L'eredità del *Contro Noeto* di Ippolito nella teologia di Marcello di Ancira e Fotino di Sirmio", in: *Il cristianesimo in Anatolia tra Marco Aurelio e Diocleziano*, ed. by Maurizio GIROLAMI, Brescia 2019 (Supplementi Adamantius, 8), 161–175.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

explicitly criticized Sabellius in his writings.[54] Thus, despite considering himself an anti-Sabellian theologian, Marcellus has been classified as a Sabellian by both ancient and modern scholars.

A similar case is Photinus of Sirmium, Marcellus' disciple, whose theol. closely aligned with that of his teacher. Yet, in both ancient and modern historiography, Marcellus came to be regarded as the archetype of Sabellianism, whereas Photinus was labeled as a proponent of the view that Christ was merely human. In reality, both Marcellus and Photinus developed a theol. in which a real, concrete human being served as the *container* of God's divine, impersonal *logos*. Although they both professed the same theol., Photinus was labeled an Ebionite because he emphasized the concrete human being in his theol. In contrast, Marcellus was considered a Sabellian because his theology emphasized the impersonal character of the Logos. These examples highlight the extent to which existing models and labels for analyzing the development of Trinitarian theol. and Christology require critical reassessment. In my view, one of the most overlooked aspects of the transition between the third and fourth centuries is the opposition of the Origenian tradition to the traditional two-stage Logos Christology. Origen's doctrine of the Son's eternal generation was not merely a variation of the Greek apologists' two-stage Christology. Rather, Origen actively opposed this kind of theol., because, in his view, it compromised the immutability of God.[55] In fact, the theol. of Alexander, Arius, and Eusebius are better understood in contrast to the two-stage Logos Christology.

2.5 Labels and Genuine Doctrinal Positions

In polemical contexts, actors often emphasize the most shocking expressions of their adversaries. When the dispute occurs between groups, this tendency intensifies, as actors not only highlight the "worst" aspects of their opponents but also associate the entire group with the most extreme opinions held by its more radical members. These dynamics have been extensively described in the social sciences and applied to the study of ancient Christianity.[56] Consequently, modern scholars must devote significant efforts to identifying the genuine issues at stake in ancient theol. debates, which are often obscured by a vast array of unbalanced and polemical expressions. It is crucial to identify the actual points of disagreement between actors and groups and to distinguish them from the alleged ones. In the Arian controversy, distinguishing between the actual theol. positions of the actors and the polemical labels they used against each other is essential. The sources document numerous serious theol. accusations, including the profession of two unbegotten gods, a materialistic view of the divine

[54] See Eusebius, *e. th.* 1.1,1 (trans. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Against Marcellus and on Ecclesiastical Theology*, ed. by Kelly M. SPOERL/Marcus VINZENT, Washington 2017 [FaCh, 135], 161): "Before embarking on the close examination of these matters, since in the middle of [Marcellus's] treatise I found that Sabellius was being criticized by him, astonished at that man's stupidity, because he did not refrain from speaking ill of one whom he ought to have praised more than all because he held beliefs and ideas similar to his, I resolved not to pass over that remark in silence, but to offer a refutation of this [man—namely, Sabellius] too in the present treatise." See also, Epiphanius, *haer.* 72.1,2.

[55] Origen, *princ.* 1.2,2.

[56] See Henri TAJFEL: *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology*, Cambridge 1981; Michael A. HOGG/Dominic ABRAMS: *Social Identifications.* A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes, London 1998; Raimo HAKOLA: "Social Identities and Group Phenomena in Second Temple Judaism," in: *Explaining Christian Origins and Judaism.* Contribution from Cognitive and Social Science, ed. by Petri LUOMANEN, Leiden 2007 (BiInS, 89), 259–276; Philip F. ESLER: "An Outline of Social Identity Theory," in: *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. by J. Brian TUCKER/Coleman A. BAKER, London 2014, 13–39.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

nature, a bodily conception of the Son's begetting, Ebionite, Docetic, or Artemonite Christologies, and Sabellian identification of the divine persons. However, none of the relevant clerics involved in the controversy upheld these extreme doctrines. These labels—often employed as accusations or insults—served to attack adversaries rather than to accurately represent their theol. positions.

The conventional approach to reconstructing Arius' theol. involves identifying theol. statements in the presbyter's letters and combining these statements with the polemical summaries provided by Alexander. This reconstruction is often placed within the retrospective framework of the narrative transmitted by early Christian historians. However, there are substantial reasons to question this conventional methodology. A notable mismatch exists between Arius' writings and Alexander's anti-Arian accusations. For instance, Alexander's letters claim that the "Arian" teaching declared the Son to be mutable, while Arius' letters professed that the Son was immutable.[57] Ancient historians addressed this discrepancy by accusing Arius of hypocrisy, while some modern scholars have suggested that Alexander misrepresented Arius' doctrine. However, Alexander's letters do not necessarily describe Arius' personal theol. Rather, they characterize "their" doctrine referring collectively to his adversaries. In turn, certain thinkers labeled as Arians, such as George of Laodicea, stated that the Son was mutable. Therefore, the "Arianism" of George was incompatible with the "Arianism" of Arius! Thus, it is imperative to distinguish between Arius' personal theol. and the teachings of other so-called Arians.[58] Alexander, who framed the controversy as a division between "us" and "them," conflated the doctrines of all his opponents into a single teaching—Athanasius followed the same pattern as Alexander. Social Identity Theory provides valuable analytical tools to understand this phenomenon.[59] As a result, Arius was credited with doctrines he never promoted. In summary, Arius taught that the Son was a creature, but not like other creatures. As he preceded creation and time, he originated directly from God, and he was immutable. In contrast, other so-called Arians, such as George of Laodicea, asserted that the Son was a creature like other creatures. These two teachings are incompatible. Consequently, to study the origins of the controversy, it is necessary to free Arius from doctrines he never held and to identify the actual points of disagreement between him and Alexander.

2.6 The Initial Theological Map of the Controversy

Once Arius is freed from doctrines he never affirmed, it becomes possible to rework the theol. map of the controversy. Ancient Christian historians described the clash between Alexander and Arius as a spark that ignited a major fire when the world was otherwise at peace. However, primary sources indicate that the conflict had significant theol. antecedents. No surviving source transmits the theol. of Arius or Alexander prior to the controversy. However, the *Demonstratio Evangelica* provides insight into the theol. of Eusebius of Caesarea before the conflict began.[60]

[57] See Samuel FERNÁNDEZ: "Who Accused Whom of What? The Outbreak of the 'Arian' Controversy," in: *JECS* 31 (2023) 431–458.

[58] Ibidem.

[59] See note 53.

[60] It is safe to say that the *Demonstratio evangelica* was written after 313 and before the beginning of the "Arian" controversy, because it has no traces of this polemic. See Sébastien MORLET: *La démonstration évangélique d'Eusèbe de Césarée.* Étude sur l'apologétique chrétienne à l'époque de Constantin, Paris 2009 (CEAug Série Antiquité, 187), 80–94.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

Traditionally, scholars map the outbreak of the controversy by comparing the alleged "Arian" doctrine with the views of Alexander of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea. This comparison typically portrays Eusebius as a *via media* between Arius, who is said to have denied the Son's divinity, and Alexander, who is seen as representing the traditional apostolic teaching that confesses the Son's divine nature. However, a closer examination of *Demonstratio Evangelica* reveals that Eusebius' theol. aligns more closely with Arius than many historians claim.[61] In fact, ancient and modern scholars often excuse Eusebius from his more radical statements,[62] though not without exceptions.[63] However, if Arius is assessed based solely on the doctrines he personally advocated, and if Eusebius' doctrinal statements are taken seriously without attempting to downplay their problematic aspects, it becomes clear that Arius' positions, which provoked the controversy, were closely aligned with Eusebius' theol. before the conflict. The pivotal statements made by Arius were: "There was when the Son was not" and "The Son came from nothing, but not as the other creatures." Eusebius, in the *Demonstratio Evangelica*, similarly asserts:

> Since one is unbegotten and the other begotten (ὁ μὲν ἀγέννητος ὁ δὲ γεννητός), one is the Father and the other is the Son, all should confess that the Father pre-exists (προϋπάρχω) and exists before (προϋφίσταμαι) the Son.[64]

This is not merely a logical priority. Eusebius emphasizes that the Son's existence results from God's free decision: "By his will, in fact, God became the Father of the Son (βουληθεὶς γὰρ ὁ θεὸς γέγονεν υἱοῦ πατήρ)."[65] Using the metaphor of light and ray as an antithesis, Eusebius argues that the Son is not constitutive of the eternal Christian God.[66] Rather, the divine Son exists, because God chose to beget him before time and creation to assist Him in the work of creation.

Additionally, Eusebius asserts that the Son was neither unbegotten nor a part of the Father, and that the Logos was not eternally within God and later begotten as the Son, as the two-stage Christology asserts.[67] Finally, Eusebius denies another claim:

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[61] On Eusebius' Trinitarian theology, see Raffaele FARINA: *L'Impero e l'Imperatore cristiano in Eusebio di Cesarea.* La prima teologia politica del cristianesimo, Zürich 1966 (BThSa.F, 2), 36–69; Alois GRILLMEIER: *Christ in Christian Tradition.* From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451), Atlanta 1975, 167–177; SIMONETTI: *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo* (note 43), 60–66; Colm LUIBHÉID: *Eusebius of Caesarea and the Arian Crisis*, Dublin 1981, 28–41; HANSON: *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (note 43), 46–59; Holger STRUTWOLF: *Die Trinitätstheologie und Christologie des Euseb von Caesarea.* Eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung seiner Platonismusrezeption und Wirkungsgeschichte, Göttingen 1999 (FKDG, 72); *Eusebio di Cesarea*: *Dimostrazione evangelica*, ed. by Paolo CARRARA, Milano 2000 (LCPM, 29); Adam RENBERG: *The Son Is Truly Son.* The Trinitarian and Christological Theology of Eusebius of Caesarea, Turnhout 2021 (StTT, 46).

[62] Pollard excuses Eusebius in the following way: he "may have been a good historian but was certainly a bad theologian," T. Evan POLLARD: *Johannine Christology and the Early Church*, Cambridge 1970 (MSSNTS, 13), 251.

[63] See Bernard MONTFAUCON: *Collectio nova patrum et scriptorum graecorum*, Paris 1706, xxviii: "ab exordio enim Arianismi ad obitum usque [Eusebius] cum Arianis concordissime vixit."

[64] Eusebius, *d. e.* 5.1,20 (GCS 23, 213). See WILLIAMS: *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (note 28), 172.

[65] Eusebius, *d. e.* 4.3,7.

[66] See Eusebius, *d. e.* 4.3,5 (GCS 23, 153).

[67] Eusebius, *d. e.* 5.1,13 (GCS 23, 212): "All that is in anything (τὸ ἔν τινι) or is found like an accident (ὡς συμβεβηκός), as white in the body; or like one in another (ὡς ἕτερον ἐν ἑτέρῳ), as that which is conceived in the womb of the pregnant woman; or like a part in the whole (ὡς μέρος ἐν τῷ ὅλῳ), as a hand, foot or finger, which are parts (μέρη). [...]. The Son was not unbegotten in the Father (ἐν τῷ πατρί) from eternity and begin-ningless ages (ἐξ ἀπείρων καὶ ἀνάρχων αἰώνων), like one in another (ὡς ἕτερον ἐν ἑτέρῳ), as if he were a part (μέρος) of

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

> But to assert simply that the Son came into being "out of nothing" (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων) just as (ὁμοίως) the other beings that have come into being is not without danger (οὐκ ἀκίνδυνον).[68]

This last expression is less specific than normally understood for two reasons:[69] the bishop does not declare the statement blasphemous, but "not free from danger," besides, he denies that the Son is out of nothing "just as the other creatures." This last qualification is crucial. One of his letters proves that the phrase "just as the other creatures" was not an explanation, but a qualification of the sentence.[70] In other words, he does not take a stance on whether the Son comes to be from nothing in a way that is different from the creatures. In any case, the priority of the Father implies that before the Son was begotten, he did not exist—a point that is consistent with Arius' claim that the Son came from nothing.

In summary, Arius can be understood as an imprudent representative of the theol. trajectory led by Eusebius. This perspective significantly alters the traditional map of the fourth-century controversy. The conventional question—whether or to what extent Eusebius was an Arian—is overshadowed by evidence suggesting that Arius was an imprudent advocate of the theol. tradition championed by Eusebius, rather than the reverse. Indeed, Arius did not portray himself as a thinker persecuted for original ideas but as a representative of the teachings of Eusebius of Caesarea, who was under attack by Alexander of Alexandria.[71] If this interpretation holds, the real threat to Alexander was Eusebius, not Arius. This framework also explains why the entire Eastern Church became involved in the controversy. What appeared to be a localized quarrel was, in fact, a broader conflict between two influential bishops who both claimed to lead the Origenian legacy—Eusebius of Caesarea and Alexander of Alexandria.[72]

These three clerics—Arius, Eusebius, and Alexander—belonged to the same Alexandrian tradition. Following Origen in different ways,[73] they rejected the two-stage Logos Christology. Alexander upheld the Origenian theol. of the eternal begetting, maintaining that there was never when the Logos was not Son. Eusebius and Arius also rejected the two-stage theol. and posited a first pre-

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the [Father], who was born after he had changed and gone outside. This is already proper to the change (τροπή) and thus there would also be two unbegotten beings (ἀγένητα)."

[68] Eusebius, *d. e.* 5.1,15 (GCS 23, 212). The Antiochian formula of 341, repeats the same idea: "For it is not safe (οὐκ ἀσφαλής) to say that the Son comes from nothing" (Athanasius, *syn.* 26.3,1).

[69] Hanson goes too far when he states that Eusebius "specifically disowns the doctrine that the Son is derived from non-existence," HANSON: *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (note 58), 52. See Christopher A. BEELEY: "Eusebius' Contra Marcellum. Anti-Modalist Doctrine and Orthodox Christology", in: *ZAC* 12 (2009) 433–452 (433).

[70] In his letter to Alexander, Eusebius denies that "the Son came into being out of nothing, as one among all (ὡς εἷς τῶν πάντων)," Eusebius, *ep. Alex.* 2 (FNS 12.2). Years later, Eusebius maintains the same view. In *De Ecclesiastica theologia*, Eusebius rejected those who asserted that the Son "ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων ὁμοίως τοῖς λοιποῖς κτίσμασιν γενόμενον," Eusebius, *e. th.* 1.9,1 (GCS 14, 67). See Eusebius, *e. th.* 1.9,6; 1.10,4.

[71] See Arius, *ep. Eus.* 3 (FNS 6.3).

[72] This theol. reconstruction is confirmed by historical events. When Ossius arrived at Alexandria (324), he aligned with Alexander and then, the bishop of Cordoba condemned Eusebius of Caesarea at Antioch (325). At Nicaea, Eusebius had to defend his orthodoxy (325). In addition, after Nicaea, Eusebius maintained his leading role: he presided over the deposition of Eustathius of Antioch (328), he was to chair the failed synod that intended to judge Athanasius in Caesarea (334), and he led the condemnation of Marcellus of Ancyra (336). This evidence proves the theol. leadership of the bishop of Caesarea.

[73] The Origenian theological tradition, however, was not a fixed body of doctrine, but rather a method, as Pamphilus emphasized. See Pamphilus, *apol.* 1–3.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

cosmic moment in which God existed alone, followed by a second pre-cosmic moment in which God caused the existence of the Son. Before his begetting, the Son was not an inner Logos within God but rather "nothing." If this interpretation is correct, the central idea supporting Eusebius' theol. framework is that as God the Father is the only unbegotten being, the Son is not constitutive of God but is the result of God's free decision. When God decided to create the world, He brought the Son into existence to assist Him in the work of creation. Therefore, prior to the Son's begetting, he was not "something" in God but "nothing." In conclusion, the key point of disagreement between Alexander and Eusebius (Arius) lies in whether the Father and Son are strictly co-eternal (Alexander) or whether the Father has an atemporal priority over the Son (Eusebius/Arius). Despite this disagreement, both adhered to the Origenian theol. of the three *hypostaseis*.

2.7 The Overlapping of Two Different Controversies

Eusebius, Arius, and Alexander represent different interpretations of the Alexandrian tradition. Consequently, the initial phase of the "Arian" crisis was primarily an internal controversy within the Origenian legacy, which was present in Egypt, Palestine, and other places. As such, the quarrel was never a purely local dispute. In fact, all the letters from the early stages of the controversy were exchanged among bishops of the Alexandrian tradition.[74] However, due to the seriousness of the conflict, Alexander sought support outside this tradition. He wrote to Philogonius and other bishops who did not share his theol. background. These bishops, nonetheless, supported the strict eternity of the Logos-Son. Additionally, Constantine involved Ossius of Cordoba in the dispute, a Western bishop. Consequently, the intra-Alexandrian controversy overlapped with the longstanding theol. tensions between Asia Minor (and the West) and Alexandria. At this stage, the sources are extremely limited. Very little information survives about the Trinitarian theol. of Eustathius of Antioch and almost nothing about Ossius' theol. positions. This scarcity of sources is surprising, given that both figures were key players at Nicaea and possibly contributed to drafting the creed.

A fragment of Marcellus of Ancyra, preserved by Eusebius, includes a letter from Narcissus of Neronias that sheds light on Ossius' concerns at the Synod of Antioch (325). Narcissus recounts Ossius questioning him about the number of divine *ousiai*:

> For as I [Marcellus] learnt in a letter of Narcissus, who presides at Neronias, written to a certain Chrestos, Euphronius, and Eusebius [of Nicomedia], that Ossius the bishop asked [Narcissus] if he would also say in this way, as Eusebius of Palestine does, that there are two *ousiai*, I learned from his writings that he answered that he believed that there were three *ousiai*.[75]

This brief fragment illustrates the intersection of two theol. disputes. The intra-Alexandrian controversy focused on the strict co-eternity of the Son (advocated by Alexander) *versus* the atemporal priority of the Father (advocated by Eusebius and Arius). Meanwhile, the traditional theol. debate between Asia Minor and the West *versus* Alexandria centered on the number of divine *ousiai* or *hypostaseis*. The overlap of these distinct controversies raises important questions about the theol. identity of the groups on the eve of Nicaea. When Ossius traveled to Alexandria with Constantine's

[74] The Alexandrian tradition became a cultural phenomenon that transcended the boundaries of Egypt, especially after the transfer of Origen to Palestine. Therefore, the adjective "Alexandrian" has a cultural rather than geographical meaning.

[75] Narcissus of Neronias, *ep.* 1 (FNS 29.1).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

letter to pacify the Egyptian Church, he aligned himself with Alexander. Yet, while Ossius rejected the multiplicity of divine *ousiai*, Alexander declared that John, the divine teacher, affirms that the Father and the Son are "two mutually inseparable things (ἀλλήλων ἀχώριστα πράγματα δύο)."[76] The expression "two things," πράγματα δύο, could not but shock the bishop of Cordoba. How, then, could Alexander and Ossius form a theol. alliance despite disagreeing on such a critical issue? The simplest answer might be that their alliance was political rather than theol. However, this explanation is problematic, as the conflict between Alexander and Arius (Eusebius) was inherently theol. in nature. This issue will be addressed below, in the conclusive hermeneutical considerations.

2.8 The Council of Nicaea and the *Homoousios*

The seemingly inconsistent alliance between Alexander and Ossius provides an important clue for understanding the theol. map at the synod of Nicaea. Tracing the doctrinal divisions of the Nicene assembly requires identifying the key theol. dividing line between the groups.[77] According to contemporary sources, the expression "*homoousios* to the Father" was the pivotal phrase that Ossius, Eustathius, and Alexander were able to endorse, while Eusebius, as the leader of the opposing group, was unwilling to accept it—at least at the beginning of the discussion. *Wolfram Kinzig* has recently analyzed the setting and history of the Nicene Creed and the discussed term *homoousios*.[78]

If a deductive way of reasoning is allowed, the content of the disputed expression must reveal the primary doctrinal difference between the two groups, whereas the genuine point of theol. disagreement between the groups sheds light on the original meaning of *homoousios*. It is therefore essential to disregard rhetorical or polemical accusations and to focus instead on the genuine theol. point of contention that divided the assembly. Accordingly, to determine the theol. dividing line at Nicaea, one must go further and distinguish between the broader theol. issues at stake and the starting point of the disagreement.

The theol. issues at stake were as follows: (a.) The divinity of the Son: While Eusebius' doctrine had serious implications for Christ's divinity, this was more a consequence of his theol. than its starting point. Eusebius professed the Son's divinity, but his opponents argued that his teachings effectively compromised it. (b.) The unity of God and the subsistence of the Son: Both groups accused each other of undermining either the unity of God or the subsistence of the Son. However, these accusations were deductions rather than doctrinal starting points held by either side. (c.) The coeternity of the Son with the Father: The original theological contrast between the two groups concerned whether the Son was strictly coeternal with the Father, or whether the Father's priority implied some form of atemporal posteriority for the Son. Much of the debate at Nicaea involved *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, with opponents accusing one another of heretical conclusions. However, the only point on which both sides took an explicit and firm stance was the disagreement between the Father's atemporal priority (emphasized by Eusebius) and the Son's strict coeternity with

[76] Alexander, *ep. Alex.* 15 (FNS 8.15).

[77] See Eusebius, *ep. Caes.* (FNS 37); Eustathius, *fr.* 79 (FNS 39); Athanasius, *decr.* 19–20.

[78] See *Kinzig*, Wolfram: *A History of Early Christian Creeds*. – Berlin: De Gruyter 2024. 768 S., brosch. € 39,95 ISBN: 9783110318524, 242–268.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

the Father (defended by Alexander).[79] All participants at Nicaea concurred that the Father alone is unbegotten. However, the core issue of contention was whether the Son's generation necessarily implied an atemporal priority of the Father. Eusebius explicitly defended this view, whereas his opponents explicitly rejected it. Indeed, when Arius described in one sentence the theol. of the bishops who supported him, he stated that they affirm: "God exists without beginning before the Son (προϋπάρχει ὁ θεὸς τοῦ υἱοῦ ἀνάρχως)."[80] Similarly, when Marcellus described his adversaries at Nicaea in a letter to Julius of Rome, he reported: "Furthermore, they declare in their writings that the Father existed before the Son (προϋπάρχειν τοῦ υἱοῦ τὸν πατέρα)."[81]

If this analysis is correct, it enables further clarification of the meaning of *homoousios*. On the one hand, contemporary sources and testimonies confirm that *homoousios* served as the dividing line between "the fathers" and "the Eusebians."[82] On the other hand, the evidence demonstrates that the primary disagreement between Eusebius and his opponents was the question of the strict coeternity of the Son with the Father *versus* the atemporal priority of the Father. Consequently, the declaration that the Son is *homoousios* to the Father would have originally aimed to affirm their strict coeternity. The expression ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρί thus conveyed that the Christian God cannot be conceived "before" and therefore apart from the Son, as the Son is both inherently united with and constitutive of the Father. This way of understanding the sentence "*homoousios* to the Father" is fully consistent with Alexander, who claims that Father and the Son are "two mutually inseparable things (ἀλλήλων ἀχώριστα πράγματα δύο)."[83] It is better to analyze the sentence rather than the isolated term ὁμοούσιος, because the sentence "*homoousios* to the Father" implies the relationship between two entities.[84] These thoughts show that the Nicene formula had no original Sabellian tendency.

Therefore, the main theol. dividing line was not the Son's divinity—despite claims to the contrary in many handbooks—nor was it a supposed opposition between the oneness of God and the personal distinction of the Son, as some modern studies suggest. Instead, the doctrinal disagreement at Nicaea revolved around the atemporal priority of the Father, advocated by Eusebius, and the strict coeternity of the Father and the Son, guaranteed by the *homoousios*, which asserts that the Son is both connatural with and constitutive of the Father.

3 Two Conclusive Considerations

Finally, I wish to propose two "marginal notes" on hermeneutical issues that, in my view, merit further academic attention. The first concerns the concept of "construction" in history, particularly in the

[79] The fragments of Eusebius' letter to Alexander are explicit. See Eusebius, *ep. Alex.* 4 (FNS 12.4): "Moreover, you accused those who said: '"The One who is" begot the one who did not exist.' But I am surprised that anyone can speak differently."

[80] Arius, *ep. Eus.* 3 (FNS 6.3).

[81] Marcellus, *ep. Jul.* 2 (Epiphanius, *haer.* 72.2,1–3,4; trans. *The Correspondence of Pope Julius I.* Greek and Latin Text and English Translation with Introduction and Commentary, ed. by Glen L. THOMPSON, Washington 2015 [LEC, 3], 19).

[82] See Eusebius, *ep. Caes.* (FNS 37); Athanasius, *decr.* 19–20.

[83] Alexander, *ep. Alex.* 15 (FNS 8.15).

[84] In fact, the phrase itself, ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρί, is constructed with a dative, which is called *dativus sociativus*, the associative dative, which implies two entities, one in relation to the other. See Lorenzo ROCCI: *Grammatica greca. Morfologia, sintassi e dialetti*, Milano 1929, 260–261.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

history of ideas. The second addresses the question of whether theology functions as a factor shaping human history.

The concept of "construction" is frequently invoked in academic studies of Nicaea. Gwynn's outstanding monograph demonstrates the extent to which "construction" serves as a helpful interpretative category and even as a key to understanding and analyzing the configurations and reception of the Arian controversy.[85] Scholars often refer to ancient "constructions" in a negative sense while treating modern "reconstructions" in a positive light. This tendency evokes certain outdated elements of positivistic historicism, as though modern, critical scholars can access historical facts directly and objectively. However, since Kant, it has been clear that the human mind does not engage with reality in a purely immediate or neutral manner. Rather, it structures experience through categories. Moreover, cognitive sciences have shown that the human brain processes reality using models, necessarily simplifying complexity to construct frameworks for understanding. The human mind is incapable of bearing the full complexity of reality. Consequently, both ancient and modern historians inevitably interpret and present history through conceptual models and, therefore, through constructed narratives. Therefore, what does it mean that "Arianism" is a polemical construction by Alexander? Of course, no cohesive party in which all members recognized Arius as their leader ever existed. However, this does not imply that "Arianism" was merely a product of Alexander's imagination or a mere polemical fiction. Instead, certain actual mutual relationships among clerics provided Alexander with the basis for constructing "Arianism."[86] The many letters exchanged between them show that they had a kind of group consciousness.[87]

Thus, "constructions" are not merely distortions but an essential tool for comprehending history. Indeed, the very term ἱστορία originally referred to a constructed narrative rather than to historical facts as such. Of course, scientific methodology, rigorous attention to sources, and critical thinking enable scholars to discern that some constructions or reconstructions are more legitimate than others, as they better account for the available textual evidence. Nonetheless, as Gwynn observes, within a few years, three "markedly disparate reconstructions" of the same Synod of Tyre (335) were proposed.[88] This situation underscores that modern academic "reconstructions" are not essentially different from ancient "constructions."

The second consideration pertains to theology as a factor that shapes human history. This issue represents a pivotal point for the academic study of religion and Christianity in particular: Does theology itself influence human actions? This question does not concern the relationship between God and human history—a matter of fundamental theology that lies beyond the scope of this article. Rather,

[85] See David M. GWYNN: *The Eusebians.* The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the "Arian Controversy", Oxford 2007 (OTM).

[86] DelCogliano accounts for the cohesiveness of "church parties" in the fourth-century Trinitarian debates. See Mark DELCOGLIANO: "The Eusebian Alliance: the Case of Theodotus of Laodicea", in: *ZAC* 12 (2008) 250–266; ID.: "Eusebius of Caesarea on Asterius of Cappadocia in the Anti-Marcellan Writings: A Case Study of Mutual Defense within the Eusebian Alliance", in: *Eusebius of Caesarea.* Tradition and Innovations, ed. by Aaron JOHNSON/Jeremy SCHOTT, Washington 2013 (Hellenic Studies Series, 60), 263–287.

[87] On "the letter warfare" see FERNÁNDEZ: *Nicaea 325* (note 38), 123–145.

[88] See David. M. GWYNN: "The Construction of a 'Heretical Party' in the *Apologia Contra Arianos* of Athanasius of Alexandria," in: *Prudentia* 35 (2003) 161–187, esp. 168; Harold A. DRAKE: "Athanasius' First Exile", in: *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 27 (1986) 193–204; ARNOLD: *The Early Episcopal Career of Athanasius of Alexandria* (note 46), 143–163; Timothy D. BARNES: *Athanasius and Constantius.* Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire, London 1993, 22–25.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849

the question is whether theol. convictions serve as genuine motivations that drive human action and thereby shape history. In academic circles, there is a reasonable suspicion surrounding this topic, as religion has often—and, regrettably, still is—used as an official pretext to mask less honorable motivations related to power, wealth, politics, ethnicity, gender, and so forth. However, is this always the case? It seems not. For instance, Eusebius of Nicomedia welcomed Arians a few months after their excommunication at Nicaea by Constantine's authority.[89] This event is difficult to explain as a mere political maneuver, particularly given that the emperor maintained one of his residences in Nicomedia. In this case, the evidence suggests that theol. convictions motivated this action, even though it would clearly entail negative consequences for the bishop, unless new evidence emerges to substantiate an alternative explanation. Besides, episcopal correspondence revolves around Trinitarian theology. These letters have indeed political dimensions and implied matters of identity. However, at least, in this group of letters, theology does not seem to be an excuse to deal with other issues.

Therefore, while reasonable critical assessment of theol. motivations remains necessary, suspicion risks becoming ideological when it transforms into a systematic exclusion of religious beliefs as factors shaping human history. This issue is particularly significant when interpreting, for example, Constantine's role in the theol. controversies of the fourth century. Scholars must critically assess the religious justifications offered by the emperor for his religious policies. Yet, scholars risk projecting modern categories into the ancient world, to the extent of systematically distrusting dynamics unusual to contemporary ways of thinking. Replacing ancient assumptions with modern assumptions is not a truly critical approach. A self-critical evaluation of our own presuppositions is necessary to engage fruitfully with the sources and appreciate the richness of a world that, in many respects, is unfamiliar to us.

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[89] See FERNÁNDEZ: *Nicaea 325* (note 38), 240–243.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17879/thrv-2025-8849