UNDERWATER EXCAVATION AND MUSEUM PROJECT AT THE BASILICA CHURCH IN İZNIK LAKE

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ABSTRACT

The ancient city of Nikaia is well known in Christian circles as the place from which an early and important statement of faith was issued: The Nicene Doctrine. The remains of the basilica church were discovered approximately in 2 meters of depth, and 30 m from the shore of the İznik Lake, outside the city walls that surround the ancient city of Nikaia in 2014. Excavation questions include to whom the structure was dedicated, why and when the church was demolished and submerged under the waters of the lake.

Metropolitan Municipality is supported an underwater museum on the coast. The museum will consist of three parts: excavation depots and offices so that the excavations can continue, exhibition and conference areas in the museum, and a rest area. In addition, the area where the ruins are lied will be opened to visitors. It is provided a pier where visitors can walk up to the ruins. If anyone wishes, the ruins will be able to visit with scuba diving in the underwater. We are considering underwater walking ranges. Thus, visitors will be able to visit underwater by walking. If the water level gets high enough again, we are planning to put a glass aquarium without water in the shape of a room in the middle nave in front of the apse. Thus, anyone who wishes can go down to the room and pray. Surely two or three at the same time.

Keywords: Nikaia, Early Christianity, Basilica Church, Underwater Museum, First Ecumenical Councils.

İznik lies in northwest Turkey. The ancient city Nikaia is located within the modern İznik, and is situated in a fertile basin at the eastern end of Lake *Ascanius* (whose modern name is Lake İznik), bounded by ranges of hills to the north and south.

The ancient city of Nikaia is well known in Christian circles as the place from which an early and important statement of faith was issued: The Nicene Doctrine. The remains of the basilica church were discovered approximately in 2 m of depth, and 30 m from the shore of the İznik Lake, outside the city walls that surround the ancient city of Nikaia, in 2014 [1] (fig. 1). Excavation questions include to whom the structure was dedicated, why and when the church was demolished and submerged under the waters of the lake. In 2019, excavation was carried out in the atrium where we thought a water well was situated. This is because the British pilgrim, Willibald, pointed out that the site of the 1st Council had a rectangular open roofed courtyard with a sacred source of oil in the middle [2]. Although we went down 150 cm deeper than the foundation walls, we could not find the bottom of the well. It was also found that the well was filled with stone. Therefore, we think that the structure was abandoned in the approximately 13th century A.D. and then sank into the lake waters [3].

Constantine relocated the capital of the Roman empire to Byzantium and renamed it after himself, Constantinople. Constantine called a council to bring together Christian leaders and theologians from across the world. This council met in Iznik (ancient Nikaia) in AD 325 [4]. The relocation of the empire to Constantinople and the choice of Nikaia as the place of this important meeting is indicative of the size and importance of the Anatolian Christian community. In the following years six more ecumenical councils met to debate Christian theology and to address Church matters. All of these historic Christian councils met in today's Turkey.

Two of these meetings were hosted by Nikaia: the 1st and 7th Ecumenical Council. The place where the 7th Council met is known. However, the place where the 1st council met remains a mystery.

One of our three hypotheses is that the Senate Palace, where the First Council meets, is located in the Basilica Church under the Lake İznik. As known, the First Council of Nikaia in 325 was depicted in the fresco in the Sistine Chapel (*Cappella Sistina*) in the Vatican (fig. 2). The meeting place of the First Council, which is recognized by all four major denominations in Christianism, remains unknown. Above-mentioned fresco depicts the council meeting along with the building [5]. Although the fresco was dated to 1590, the depiction of the landscape from a window on the left corner make the fresco interesting for our study (fig. 3). Based on the landscape, it

Fig. 1 -*Drone photo of the Basilica Church.*

Fig. 2 - *The fresco of first Nikaia Council in the Sistine Chapel in Vatican.*

appears that the meeting was held in an extramural building and by the İznik Lake, which shares similarities with the building we are going to excavate.

We obtain information about the architecture of the structure where the 1st Council was gathered from a British pilgrim named Willibald (727-729)[6]. Willibald likens the church to the church on Mount Olives, where Jesus ascended to heaven, and furthermore, he says that there are depictions of the bishops who joined the Council. He also states that the upper part of the hall was open, there is a bronze altar in the middle and there is a candle in a glass lantern to burn it in all weather conditions.

John Covel, who visited the site in 1675, mentions that there is a small gate protected by two towers called Bahçekapı (garden-gate) between the Göl-Gate and the Yenişehir-Gate[7]. In the meadow in front of the gate, the Turks gather in Ramadan and worship. At the foot of the walls, there was a holy spring called "318 Apostles" (three

hundred eighteen) by the native Christian citizens. The gates and holy spring are found in our research in 2019. The fact that the name of the holy spring is 318 apostles, and it is proximity to our basilica may be another sign that the Palace of the Council will be here.

As far as we have learned from Willibald, the place where the 1st Ecumenical Consul was gathered is an open hall, and there is a well or pool U-shaped structure in which the sacred oil is extracted. Based on this information, the possibility occurred that the area surrounded by monolithic stones in the section we call the atrium could be a well (fig. 1, 4). For this reason, the excavations since 2019 were shifted to the sounding area, which we marked with the number 12. Starting from the first level throughout the trench - to a depth of 140 cm, it is heavily filled with rubble stones and tile pieces. In the excavation made parallel to the wall in the southwest corner of the area, it was determined that the row of stones at the upper level continues at the bottom.

Fig. 3 - *Detail of the fresco.*

During the excavations in 2019, 82 coins were found. 37 of these coins belong to the Late Byzantine Period, known as the scyphate coins and used between 11th-13th centuries AD (fig. 5), one of which is silver and the others are bronze. Coins point to a wide range of time periods from the forth to the thirteenth century. Most of the ceramics found to consist of fine ceramics. It was determined that they were generally produced between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Among the metal works, the density consists of nails of different sizes. Glass pieces belonging to bracelets and vessels are also among the finds (fig. 6). In addition to rubble stones, there are many fragmented marble and stone artefacts in the filling material. For example, piece of colonnettes, piece of baptistery or ambon, piece of osthotek or grave stele, etc.

Fig. 4 - *U-shaped constuction in the* atrium.

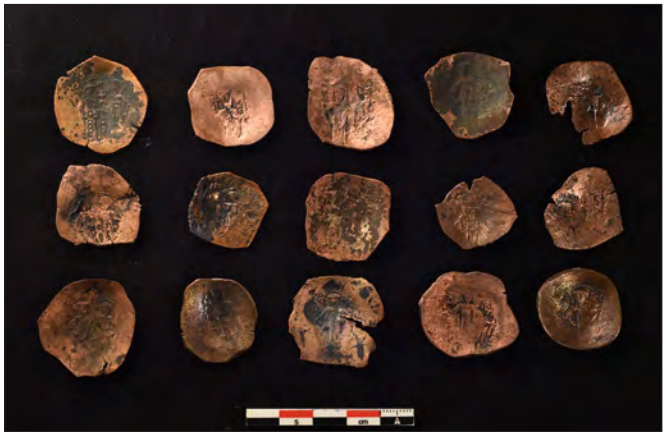

Fig. 5 - ***Examples of the scyphate coins.***

Fig. 6 - ***Glass bracelet.***

In 2020, we had to interrupt the excavations. After that in 2021 we continued the excavation in the triangular building in the atrium, too. In the depth of 200 cm, wooden girders were encountered under the marble block walls on all three sides (fig. 7). We did not expect this wooden structure. The U-shaped building is gone down by the wooden stairs from the west. We do not know what comes under this structure. I think there could be a vaulted infrastructure in the depth.

The date of the church, according to the coins found in the tombs under the bema wall, must be after 390 AD [8].

Marble column drums found on the surface, one of which is 160 cm in diameter, suggest that the church may have been built over a temple. A large number of coins, terracotta oil lamps, especially an erotic lamp fragment, dating to the 1st centuries BC-3rd centuries AD, strengthen the possibility of a temple in this area. An inscription found in Nikaia is about the Emperor Commodus (180-192 AD) having the architect Baktyanus built a temple for Apollo outside the city wall (183 AD) [9]. Probably the lost temple of Apollo of Nikaia is here. Our excavations continued in this place in 2022.

Fig. 7 - ***Detail of wooden girders under the marble blocks.***

Bursa Metropolitan Municipality has been supporting the excavations since the beginning. The underwater museum will be built an area of 750 square meters (fig. 8). The museum is planned to consist of three parts: excavation depots and offices so that the excavations can continue, exhibition and conference areas in the museum, and a rest area.

For this purpose, a protected area on the coast was determined first (fig. 9). Afterwards, the preliminary project was prepared. Now the application project is being prepared. First, we want to provide controlled access to the area. At the entrance, there will be a museum on the left, a cafe on the right, and a large terrace in the front (fig. 10). The left side of the field will be reserved entirely for underwater archaeologists. In same time, the area where the ruins are lied will be opened to visitors. It is provided a floating pier where visitors can walk up to the ruins. If anyone wishes, the ruins will be able to visit with snorkeling or scuba diving underwater. We are considering underwater walking ranges. Thus, visitors will be able to visit underwater by walking, and walk like a Nikaian (fig. 11). If the water level gets high enough again, we are planning to put a glass aquarium without water in the shape of a room in the middle nave in front of the apse. Thus, anyone who wishes can go down to the room and pray. Surely two or three at the same time. If the water level continues to decrease, perhaps the u-shaped area in the atrium can also be used for underwater visitation.

In the virtual museum, we first want to show the phases of the building with virtual reality. For this purpose, we work with Dr. Dominik Maschek and Michael Sterrer-Schneyder. According to the clues at hand, they demonstrated the temple phase very successfully. The church phase of the building is about to be completed.

Fig. 8 - ***The Underwater Museum Project.***

Fig. 9 - ***The protected area around of the Basilica Church on the coast (Google Earth).***

Fig. 10 - ***Visit to the ruins on the floating pier.***

French director Pascal Guérin is about to complete the shooting of a 90-minute documentary film for promotional purposes. In the documentary – the ruins, its importance and scientific studies – excavations will be explained in detail. It is expected to be released towards the end of the year.

Article 1 of the Faro Convention states that «rights relating to cultural heritage are inherent in the right to participate in cultural life». Article 4 states that «everyone... has the right to benefit from the cultural heritage and to contribute towards its enrichment». In this context, the 3rd Saturday of each month between 10-14 o'clock is reserved as a public information day, in order for the local people to be informed about the excavations.

In addition, regular interviews are given to national and international media organizations to inform those who are interested.

İznik is significant not only for the history of Turkey, but also for an understanding of the Christian faith. The work at Iznik has already received great international acclaim and it has the potential to become one of Turkey's top cultural sites.

Fig. 11 - ***Visit to the ruins by walking (https://www.sea-trek.com/pressrelease/).***

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Notes

[1] Powel 2015, 27.

[2] Mango 2004, 305, footnote 4.

[3] Şahin 2022, 342-343.

[4] Schatz 2008, 31.

[5] Veth 2002, 209-455.

[6] Mango 2004, 305, footnote 4.

[7] Covel 1998, 269, 271, 273-299.

[8] Şahin 2017, 80-81.

[9] Şahin 1987, 15 T 14.