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SELECT PICTORIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE 325 A.D. COUNCIL OF NICAEA¹

Abstract: This article will discuss what more recent pictorial representations tell us about the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea (Iznik) which took place 325 A.D.² – this is an interesting inquiry since no minutes were taken at the Council itself and no records have been handed down.

Keywords: Council, Nicaea, Iznik, Arius

In accordance with the significance of this event, there are numerous depictions in a variety of art genres and regions.

Some of these will be offered here in order to illustrate what the more recent pictorial representations tell us about the First Ecumenical Council; this is all the more interesting when we take into account that no minutes were taken at the Council itself and no records have been handed down.

The iconographic visual arrangement of most of the representations³ reflects a philosopher's circle with the emperor, who is indicated by a crown and nimbus, and is seated in the center with several bishops to the left and right. According to the Byzantine viewpoint, the emperor is an administrator appointed by God – also in matters of the faith. His central position and, above all, his seat on the throne identify him as the primary person in the event. The fundamental idea underlying the layout is the cooperation between church and state, and thereby the unity of the empire.

The heretic Arius, sometimes labeled with his name, often cowers below in the foreground. Dating to the beginning of the 11th century, the painting in the refectory of the Bačkovó Monastery in Bulgaria (Fig. 1) serves as an example of this. In this painting, Emperor Constantine I is seated in the center, pictured with a crown and nimbus as well as a Latin cross in his right hand. He is flanked by two bishops on both his left and right, while the heretic Arius lies on the floor in front of him.

¹ See most recently U. Heil – J.-H. Tück, *Nicaea. Das erste Konzil*, Freiburg 2025.

² The author would like to thank Prof. Mag. E. Lesacher for very useful information.

³ For a general overview see H. J. Sieben, *Konzilsdarstellungen – Konzilsvorstellungen. 1000 Jahre Konzilsikonographie aus Handschriften und Druckwerken*, Würzburg 1990.



Fig. 1 Bačkovo Monastery (Foto: R. J. Pillinger)

Сл. 1 Манастир Бачково

A full range of Council cycles are depicted in various churches and monasteries, such as in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. There, however, only a small fragment of the representation of Nicaea has survived, for which reason we will not go into greater detail here.⁴

Seven ecumenical councils were likewise depicted in St. Sophia's church in Kyiv, although only the first one (Fig. 2) has remained intact.

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea is represented in the Kyiv Cave Monastery (Fig. 3), showing Emperor Constantine mightily enthroned in the center of the image.

An icon from the Megalo Meteoron Monastery (Fig. 4) depicts Emperor Constantine in front of a church; once more he is positioned in the center, is

⁴ Greater detail in G. Kühnel, *Die Konzilsdarstellungen in der Geburtskirche in Bethlehem: Ihre kunsthistorische Tradition und ihr kirchenpolitisch-historischer Hintergrund*, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 86/87 (1993/94) 86 – 107 and Plates 6 – 11.



Fig. 2 Kyiv, St. Sophia's church (Internet)

Сл. 2 Кијев. Црква Св. Софије

shown with nimbus, wears a crown and holds a scroll. The emperor is surrounded by bishops holding books of the Gospels, while the heretic Arius covers at his feet on the ground.

From the museum of the Alexandrian Patriarchate, another representation shows Emperor Constantine enthroned in the midst of the Council Fathers, with Jesus above him under a baldachino and the condemned Arius at his feet, covering his ears (Fig. 5). An icon by Michael Damaskinos (Fig. 6) from 1591 has a tabernacle with an open gospel book in the center of the assembly, and an altar with Christ and the Eucharistic gifts above it. To the right is the emperor with nimbus and crown, to the left is Pope Silvester with tiara; bishops are seated in three rows.

In a fresco by Speranza, dating around 1600 and located in the Sistine Hall (*grande Sala Sistina*) of the Vatican (Fig. 7), Emperor Constantine is seated to the far left in the front, virtually *in dextro cornu* – just as the primary figure in ancient depictions of the banquet would be shown. In the center we see again the open book of the Gospels.

Some icons – such as one from Mount Athos (Fig. 8) or one in the Chiesa Santissimo Salvatore in Cosenza (Fig. 9) – show Emperor Constantine and bishops unrolling the text of the Nicene Creed.

In a Russian typikon (liturgical calendar), we find the Council depicted on July 16, rather than the saint of the day. A resurrected Christ standing on a cloud at the top left of the picture makes it clear that the topic is the first in the council series (Fig. 10), namely the first Nicaenum. There is another gruesome detail in the right foreground of the image, namely the death of Arius. According to Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* 38, his death was caused by the discharge of his entrails

from his body. This and similar details can be found in almost all church historians, including Rufinus and Sozomenos. They date back to Athanasius's letter to Serapion, with new details added time and again.

The depiction of this terrible death, which did not take place until eleven years after the Council, can also be found in quite a few other images, such as a Russian icon (Fig. 11).

Since the death of Arius did not occur until 336, one wonders why he was included in the depictions of the Council. It can probably be assumed that he was intended as a warning to all those who did not follow orthodox doctrine.

In the center of a 19th century icon (Fig. 12), we see a person seated at a table with candles, surrounded by Council members. The Christ child stands under a baldachino behind him in the midst of the Council participants, and next to him is the Patriarch Petros of Alexandria. Emperor Constantine is seated in front of him; the presbyter Arius stands at the very front next to a figure wearing dark garments and without a halo. According to legend, Nicholas of Myra is said to have slapped the opponent Arius – this is precisely this detail depicted here; it can also be found on other icons. Although this is only a legend, it certainly demonstrates that discussions in Nicaea were not always peaceful.

Interestingly enough, this scene has even spread into graffiti in Beograd (Fig. 13).

On an icon from the Hilandar Monastery on Mount Athos (Fig. 14), Arius is once more dressed in black. The Basilica of St Nicholas in Myra (today's Demre) in Lycia/Turkey, depicts the First Ecumenical Council (Fig. 15), although it differs from the images presented here at the beginning in that it shows the cross in the center.⁵

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ОДАБРАНЕ ЛИКОВНЕ ПРЕДСТАВЕ НИКЕЈСКОГ САБОРА ИЗ 325. ГОДИНЕ

Основни облик је медаљон са царем или Светим писмом, Светим тајнама или крстом у средини, окружен учесницима Сабора (епископима). Текст Символа вере ретко је приказан у целости. У неким случајевима, међутим, представљени су и додатни детаљи засновани на предањима, као што су смрт Арија или шамар Николаја Мирликијског. Ипак, ове ликовне представе веома су информативне за касније тумачење Првог васељенског сабора у Никеји (данашњи Изник у Турској).

⁵ For Translation into english I want to thank R. Ohm.



Fig. 3 Kyiv, Cave Monastery (Internet)

Сл. 3 Пећински манастир



Fig. 4 Megalo Meteoron Monastery

(After U. Heil – J.-H. Tüch (Edd.), Note 1, Cover)



Fig. 5 Museum of
the Alexandrian
Patriarchate
(Internet)



Fig. 6 Icon of Michael
Damaskenos
(Internet)



Fig. 7 Vatican, Grande Sala Sistina
(Internet)



Fig. 8 Icon from Mount
Athos
(Internet)



Fig. 9 Cosenza, Chiesa Santissimo Salvatore
(Internet)



Fig. 10 Russian typicon
(H. J. Sieben [as note 3] 49, Fig. 33)



Fig. 11 Russian icon
(Internet)

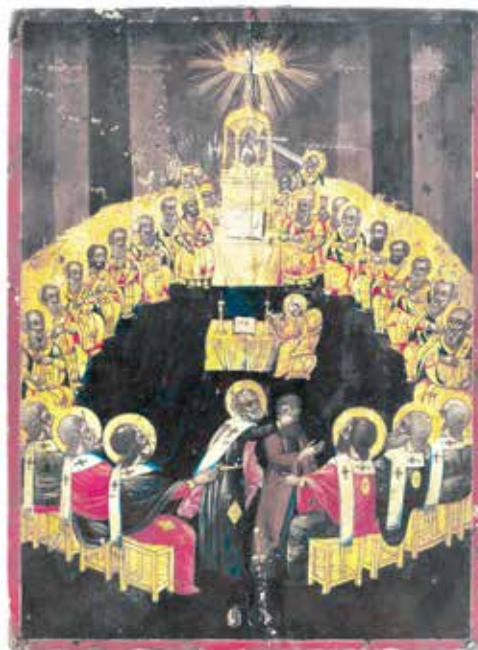


Fig. 12 19th century icon
(Internet)



Fig. 13 Graffito in Beograd
(Internet)



Fig. 14 Athos, Icon from the Hilandar Monastery (Internet)



Fig. 15 Myra/Demre, Basilica of St Nicholas (Internet)