



MARK R. FAIRCHILD

THE
UNDERWATER
BASILICA OF
NICAEA

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE
BIRTHPLACE OF CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY



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CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY OF NICAEA AND CHRISTIAN BEGINNINGS IN BITHYNIA

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NICAEA

The Sangarius River (known as the Sakarya today) is the third longest river in Turkey. It flows a mere fifteen miles to the east of Iznik. Portions of an ancient road leading to Nicaea and a Roman bridge crossing the Sangarius can be seen today. According to the myth, the river god Sangarius and the indigenous Anatolian goddess Cybele gave birth to the Nenaïd nymph, Nikaia. Nikaia was associated with the springs and lake at Nicaea. She was a devoted follower of Artemis, the Greek manifestation of Cybele. Nonnus, a fifth-century AD epic poet, claims that the city Nicaea was named after Nikaia. According to the myth, the god Dionysus fell in love with Nikaia, but she rejected him. Nevertheless, Dionysus schemed to rape Nikaia, and he impregnated her. Nikaia gave birth to a daughter, Telete. As the story goes, the site at Nicaea was founded by Dionysus and named after his lover Nikaia: “And the god built a city of fine stone beside the tipplers’ lake, Nikaia, city of Victory, which he named after the nymph.”¹ Telete was destined to follow Dionysus and became involved in the ritual dances and initiation rites for the Bacchic mysteries.

Myths aside, excavations have revealed that the site of Nicaea was first occupied around 2500 BC. Much later in time, a Hellenistic tradition claimed that the city was founded by men from the army of Alexander the Great who had come from another Nicaea, a town near Thermopylae in central Greece. These men named their settlement after their former

¹Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 16.1-405.



Figure 1.1. Roman bridge crossing the Sangarius River near Osmaneli

home. Perhaps more trustworthy is the testimony of Sephanus of Byzantium, who claimed that the site was colonized by Bottiaean (in ancient Macedonia) as early as the seventh century BC and that the place was called Ankore. After Alexander's conquests, in 316 BC Antigonus Monophthalmus established a city at this place and named it after himself, Antigoneia. Following the battle of Ipsus in 301 BC, Lysimachus gained control of the city, reestablished it, and named it after his wife, Nicaea.

After Lysimachus's death in 281 BC, Nicaea was taken by Nicomedes I, and the city functioned as the capital of the kingdom of Bithynia until the capital was moved to Nicomedia in 265 BC. The city was strategically located on trade routes, and throughout the third century the town flourished and was often the residence of the kings of Bithynia. Near the end of the second century BC, Rome started intruding into Anatolia and Bithynia. When Nicomedes IV was made king in 94 BC, he was little more than a Roman pawn. The king of Pontus, Mithridates VI, attempted to overthrow Nicomedes, and in 88 BC Mithridates had eighty thousand Roman settlers executed in several western Anatolian cities. This sparked

the First Mithridatic War from 88 to 84. A second war with Mithridates was fought from 83 to 81, at which time a treaty was signed. Finally, when Nicomedes IV died in 74 BC, he offered Bithynia to the Romans and the Senate promptly made Bithynia a province, naming Nicaea as its capital. This prompted Mithridates VI to launch the Third Mithridatic War, lasting from 73 to 63 BC. Rome crushed Mithridates in the war and abolished any further threats from the Pontic king.²

Strabo provided a description of the city at the beginning of the first century.³ He referred to it as the metropolis of Bithynia, located on Ascania Lake and surrounded by a large and fertile plain. Coins minted in Nicaea confirm that it was given the coveted title of metropolis.⁴ Strabo asserted that the city was quadrangular in shape with streets intersecting at right angles according to the Hippodamian city plans. The city's perimeter was sixteen stadia (around two miles). At Strabo's time, the city had four gates, one in each direction, and they were all visible from the gymnasium located in the center of the city. Based on the ruins in the city today, Strabo's description seems quite accurate.

The city prospered throughout the Roman imperial period. Augustus significantly added to the city's infrastructure, and during the reign of Claudius, Nicaea became the chief city of Bithynia. Vespasian constructed large triumphal arches in the north at the Istanbul Gate, in the east at the Lefke Gate, and in the south at the Yenişehir Gate. Nicomedia, located forty miles to the north, also vied for prominence in Bithynia, and at one time or another each city became the capital of the province. In 110 Pliny the Younger was appointed governor (Praetorian Legate) of Bithynia and Pontus. During that time Pliny was faced with the question of what to do with Bithynian residents that had been identified as Christians. From a letter that he wrote to the Emperor Trajan, it is evident that Christianity had made great gains throughout the region. More of this will be discussed below.

In 123 the Emperor Hadrian visited the city, and Nicaea maintained its prominent position from the late imperial period through the Byzantine

²Cf. the well-written volume by Adrienne Mayor, *The Poison King: The Life and Legend of Mithridates, Rome's Deadliest Enemy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³Strabo, *Geography* 12.4.7.

⁴A "metropolis" was the "mother city" of a province, an honor implying the significance of the city. The metropolis was usually the seat of the governing authorities.

period. The senator and historian Dio Cassius was born and raised in Nicaea in the middle of the second century before moving to Italy after his father's death, around 180. He later returned to Anatolia when he was appointed curator of Pergamon and Smyrna.

By the early third century, the walls from the Hellenistic period were in a serious state of disrepair. They offered little resistance to the Goths, who swept down from the north in 258 and wiped out the cities of Bithynia and the surrounding areas. The residents of Nicaea fled before the Goths and returned to find their city burned and destroyed. The residents rebuilt the city and its walls. The new city walls were attached to the triumphal arches constructed earlier by Vespasian, and the project was completed under the reign of Claudius Gothicus (268–270). The new city walls were three miles in length, around thirteen feet thick, and roughly thirty feet in height.

The Emperor Constantine had a palace constructed on the lake, and the First and Seventh Ecumenical Councils were held in Nicaea in 325 and 787. The Nicene Creed, one of the first and most important doctrinal statements by the Christian church, was formulated at the First Ecumenical Council. Here 250 to 318 bishops from across the Mediterranean gathered together in Constantine's palace to discuss, debate, and agree on some of the primary Christian beliefs. This will be described in more detail later.

As early as the late seventh century the Muslim caliphs began their incursions into Anatolia. The Taurus Mountains in southeast Anatolia slowed the Muslim advances until the ninth century, when renewed attempts to conquer the Byzantine Empire succeeded, in part because of civil war within the empire. The crushing defeat of the Byzantine forces at the battle of Manzikert in 1071 by the Seljuk Turks opened the bulk of Anatolia to Seljuk control. In 1078 the governor of Nicaea, Nikephoros III Botaneiates, seized control of Constantinople with the assistance of Turkish mercenaries and was made emperor over the declining Byzantine Empire.⁵ Upon leaving Nicaea, Nikephoros left the city, along with Cyzicus, Nicomedia, Chalcedon, and Chrysopolis, to the control of the Muslim

⁵Clive Foss, *Nicaea: A Byzantine Capital and Its Praises* (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College, 1996), 35-38.

Suleyman ibn Qutalmish in exchange for his assistance in gaining the Byzantine throne. Suleyman made Nicaea the capital of his newly enlarged state (the Sultanate of Rum).⁶ The fall of the Byzantine Empire and Constantinople was completed centuries later in 1453 when the Ottoman army led by Sultan Mehmed II breached the walls and conquered the city.⁷



Figure 1.2. Masonry jutting out into Lake Iznik, north of the submerged basilica

CHRISTIAN BEGINNINGS IN NICAEA

There are no concrete traditions detailing how Christianity was first established in Nicaea or Bithynia. However, the Acts of the Apostles might offer a few clues. On Paul's so-called second mission with Silas and Timothy (Acts 16), it is reported that Paul wanted to enter Asia (most probably Ephesus), but the Holy Spirit forbade him from doing so. Consequently, the apostle turned north and was trying to enter Bithynia. But again, the Spirit prevented him from entering Bithynia. Lying in the

⁶Foss, *Nicaea*, 41-42.

⁷Cf. An engaging volume on the conquest is Roger Crowley's *1453: The Holy War for Constantinople and the Clash of Islam and the West* (New York: Hyperion, 2005).

south of Bithynia, Nicaea was the major city that attracted the attention of Paul. Twice frustrated, Paul and his companions came to Troas (Alexandria Troas) and received a vision bidding him to sail to Europe.

On his next mission, after strengthening the churches in Galatia and Phrygia, Paul quickly made his way to Ephesus (Acts 18). There he spent the next three years, the longest period of time he spent in one city on any of his journeys. During that time Paul taught at the school (or lecture hall)⁸ of Tyrannus.⁹ Students from this school not only learned the gospel, but also traveled to the neighboring regions to share the faith. Acts 19:10 described the results of this ministry: “so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord.” Since Paul had designs on evangelizing Bithynia on his earlier mission, it is plausible that Paul’s disciples were also sent to Nicaea and Bithynia during this time.

Another possibility is that the apostle Peter may have spent time in Bithynia. The first epistle of Peter is addressed to residents of Pontus, Cappadocia, Galatia, Asia, and Bithynia. Although the epistle never explicitly states that Peter visited these regions, it seems probable that he did. The apostles typically wrote their letters to Christian communities that they had personally established or supervised. It is known that Peter came to Rome sometime in the latter half of the first century, but there is little known about his travels until his arrival in Rome. When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans around AD 58, Paul greeted twenty-five people by name and several others in the church at Rome. However, Peter was not one of them. This would be strange if Peter was there at the time. Eusebius, following 1 Peter 1:1, assumed that Peter visited Bithynia along with Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Asia.¹⁰ Likewise Epiphanius and

⁸Schools for Jews were in the synagogue; however schools for Gentiles were in the gymnasium. The expression “school of Tyrannus” suggests that Tyrannus was the owner of this location and that this place was not in the gymnasium. Wealthy people often had villas that included lecture halls. Sometimes these were large dining rooms where lectures accompanied the meals. Some of the slope houses excavated by the Austrians in Ephesus contain such lecture halls. The fact that Paul taught in the lecture hall for two years indicates that Tyrannus was a convert or sympathizer.

⁹The Ephesus Museum in Selçuk displays an inscribed stele found in the harbor. The stele contains the names of many wealthy citizens of Ephesus who contributed money for harbor construction projects. The Tyrannus family is mentioned twice on the stele. Another inscription mentioning the Tyrannus family currently resides in the collection located in the foundations of the temple of Domitian.

¹⁰Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1.2, 3.4.2.

Jerome believed Peter was in the area.¹¹ According to Epiphanius, “Paul even reached Spain, and Peter often visited Pontus and Bithynia.”

Peter’s familiarity with the region and the Christian community’s troubles in the area are manifest in the first epistle.¹² All five chapters of the letter describe the afflictions and persecutions of those who confessed faith in Christ. Achtemeier notes that the policy in Rome during the early imperial period was such that the emperors were revered as divine only after their death. “In the provinces, however, particularly Asia Minor, it was another matter. All of the emperors mentioned above had divine honors paid to them.”¹³ Christians who refused to participate in the imperial cult experienced levels of persecution that ranged from verbal harassment to economic sanctions, to physical abuse or death. Those who administered the abuse were local administrators and citizens. “A challenge to the emperor cult in those provinces was not only a challenge to Roman rule, it was a challenge to the social fabric itself, and constituted a threat to unravel the cultural continuity such cultic activity provided. Pressure to conform therefore would be greater from the local indigenous authorities than from the Roman overlords.”¹⁴

The text is sprinkled with statements that display the troubles the Christian community was experiencing: “you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Pet 1:6), “refined by fire” (1 Pet 1:7), “rejected by humans” (1 Pet 2:4), “suffer for what is right” (1 Pet 3:14), “the fiery ordeal that has come on you” (1 Pet 4:12), “if you suffer as a Christian” (1 Pet 4:16), “those who suffer according to God’s will” (1 Pet 4:19), “the same kinds of sufferings” (1 Pet 5:9). The Christians were being falsely slandered: “though they accuse you of doing wrong” (1 Pet 2:12) and “those who speak maliciously against your good behavior” (1 Pet 3:16) and were being intimidated: “do not fear their threats” (1 Pet 3:14). Charges were brought against the Christians in legal proceedings:

¹¹Epiphanius, *Panarion* 27.6.6; Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 1.

¹²Per Achtemeier, “It is evident that the author of 1 Peter knows that the readers suffer the disfavor of, indeed persecution by, those who do not share the Christian faith.” Paul Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 23.

¹³Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 27. Achtemeier’s earlier reference was to temples that were built in Asia to Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, and Trajan.

¹⁴Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 28.

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right” (1 Pet 2:13-14), and the Christians were instructed to be ready to make a defense (ἀπολογία—a legal term used to describe a response to charges) to those who slandered and challenged them (1 Pet 3:15-16).

If it is accepted that Peter or one of Paul’s disciples spent time in these regions, where did they go and where were the early Christian communities established? This is largely guesswork. However, based on the patterns of Christian evangelists, one can posit some educated guesses. The early Christian evangelists typically targeted large and prominent cities within the Roman provinces. Nicaea was the chief city of Bithynia during the first century, and the city had a network of Roman roads that provided easy access from other large cities to Nicaea. From Cyzicos, a road traveled east to Nicaea. Another road from Pergamon led northeast to Nicaea. Roads coming from the west connected Ancyra and Sinope to Nicaea. And still other roads went north from Nicaea to Nicomedia and on to Byzantium.

The early Christian evangelists typically visited cities that had a Jewish presence. They shared the gospel message in the synagogues. An inscription found in an underground baptistry (or fountain) associated with the Koimesis church in Nicaea was inscribed with a menorah and Jewish Scripture. The piece was reused from elsewhere to frame the pool. This indicates that there was an early Jewish presence in the city.¹⁵ The inscription cites Psalm 135. The piece was probably originally part of a synagogue, and the inscription was used for liturgical purposes (see plate 3).

Unfortunately, aside from the Bible, written sources tell us only a fraction of what we would like to know the early Christian communities in Anatolia. The earliest Christian community in Nicaea is even more obscure. The second century apocryphal writing Acts of Andrew may

¹⁵Alfons M. Schneider, *Die römischen und byzantinischen Denkmäler von Iznik-Nicaea*, Istanbulischer Forschungen, 16 (Berlin: Deutsches archäologisches Institut, 1943), 17, dates the inscription to the second century, but Steven Fine and Leonard Rutgers, “New Light on Judaism in Asia Minor During Late Antiquity: Two Recently Identified Inscribed Menorahs,” *JSQ* 3 (1996): 17, suggest a date between the fourth and sixth centuries.

include local traditions of the apostle's visit to the city.¹⁶ It claims that the apostle Andrew came to Nicaea, where he cast out seven demons, baptized the people of the city, and appointed a bishop (Callistus) to oversee the church.¹⁷ Even if the details of the account are legendary, there is no reason to discount the presence of Andrew in the city. It would make no sense to describe such a visit if the residents of Nicaea had no recollection of Andrew. Pliny the Younger's correspondence with Trajan in the early second century also gives us some insight into the presence of Christian communities in Bithynia. The letters describe the governor's and emperor's policy for dealing with them. Pliny's letter indicates that the number of Christians in the province was considerable, and that the Christian faith had spread to the cities, towns, and farms and had permeated all steps of society from the nobility to the peasants and slaves.

.....
 TRAJAN, PLINY THE YOUNGER,
 AND THE CHRISTIANS IN BITHYNIA

The book of Revelation in clear, thinly veiled terminology, described the social, economic, and physical persecutions suffered by Christians in seven cities of western Anatolia during the reign of Domitian. Of course, the troubles of the Christians were not isolated to those cities, but were troubles experienced in Christian communities throughout the region. The ruthless tyrant was disliked not only by the Christians, but by most of the powerful senatorial families. After the autocrat was assassinated in AD 96, the Senate declared *damnatio memoriae*, and his memory was stricken from the public records and inscriptions.

Following the tempestuous years of Domitian, the question was, What would be the policies of the emperors that followed Domitian? Following Domitian's assassination, the Senate promptly named Nerva as the emperor. Nerva ruled for only sixteen months before passing away of natural causes. The Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius regarded him as a

¹⁶Schneemelcher dates the Acts of Andrew as early as AD 150, though additions and revisions followed in the years thereafter. Wilhelm, Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, *Writings Related to the Apostles; Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 115.

¹⁷Acts of Andrew 6. The Acts of Andrew is preserved in several versions. The details of Andrew's ministry in Nicaea are recorded in the *Narratio*.

good and fair emperor. Eusebius, the Christian historian, did not have much to say about Nerva, primarily because his term was short. But it could be inferred from Eusebius's brief comments that Christians were treated well. Those who were exiled were permitted to return, and their property was restored.¹⁸

When Trajan followed Nerva in AD 98, the imperial policy toward Christians seems to have been a resumption of Domitian's program, although it appears that he less aggressively pursued followers of the faith. Still, Trajan was intolerant of the Christians, and he regenerated the program of persecuting members of the new faith. Trajan interpreted the Christians' obstinate refusal to participate in the imperial cult as an act of treason.

The early Christian Ignatius was a disciple of the apostle John and was appointed minister of the church in Syrian Antioch near the end of the first century. Following Trajan's ascension to the imperial throne and his conquest of Dacia, Trajan set his sights on the conquest of the Parthian kingdom. At the same time, the emperor had designs on subduing the intractable Christians. While at Antioch, Trajan had Ignatius brought before him for questioning. Following Ignatius's refusal to worship the Roman pagan deities, Trajan ordered that Ignatius be bound and sent to Rome for execution.

Accompanied by ten soldiers, Ignatius sailed to Smyrna, where he met Polycarp, a fellow disciple of John, and other leaders of churches in Asia. From there, Ignatius wrote letters to the churches in Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles. The journey continued to Troas, where Ignatius wrote additional letters to the churches at Philadelphia and Smyrna, as well as a letter to Polycarp. Before departing from Asia, Ignatius also wrote a letter to the Christian community in Rome. The *Martyrium Ignatii*, a document purportedly written by two of Ignatius's companions on the journey to Rome, detailed the travel to Rome and the martyrdom sometime around AD 110. The authenticity of the document is disputed, but the account probably roughly followed the route taken on the journey and documented Ignatius's encounters with church leaders along the way.

¹⁸Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.20.10-11.

One of Trajan's friends and advisers, Pliny the Younger, stealthily maneuvered his way through the difficult years of Domitian's reign and rose in rank through a number of civil offices. Pliny, the nephew of the Roman statesman Pliny the Elder, was named consul in AD 100.¹⁹ Ten years later in 110 Trajan appointed Pliny to govern the provinces of Bithynia and Pontus.²⁰ Bithynia and Pontus previously were two separate provinces along the southern coast of the Black Sea. Now they were combined. Bithynia was more populated and was more Romanized, while Pontus was more rugged and mountainous. The Pontic population largely maintained their traditional lifestyles.

One of Pliny's chief tasks was to set in order the financial matters of some of Bithynia's cities. Nicomedia was the capital of Bithynia at that time and Pliny governed from Nicomedia. As it was the second city of the province, Pliny had several dealings with Nicaea and the city was frequently mentioned in his letters. The province of Bithynia abutted the province of Asia, and Pliny's term as governor was closely connected to the time and places of Ignatius's letters to the churches in Asia. Even though Pliny never mentioned Ignatius by name, he was no doubt familiar with the developments in the province to the south of Bithynia.

As a newly appointed governor, Pliny was made aware of the growing Christian population in the region. And he was aware that from the time of Domitian the imperial policy required that all citizens embrace the Roman gods as well as participate in support of the imperial cult. He also knew that, according to earlier precedent, Christian defiance of these policies was punishable with death. Even though Pliny was somewhat aware of Trajan's policies regarding the treatment of Christians, he was unsure of how these policies applied to specific individuals. Should the nobility be subject to the same application of the policy as peasants? How should Roman citizens, or young children be dealt with? What about

¹⁹Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 4-6. Pliny learned the political arts of compromise, flattery, and silence.

²⁰Pliny's powers and responsibilities are debated. His official title, *legatus Augusti pro praetore*, was typical for senior provincial governors. As Hicks notes, his "legal powers and position would have been parallel to most governors of major provinces." See Benjamin Hicks, "Pliny the Younger and the Role of the Governor in Imperial Communication" (paper from the 109th Annual Meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, Iowa City, 2013), 3-4.

those who apostatized? Should they be punished or forgiven? Pliny knew practically nothing about the Christians and their faith.²¹ Nevertheless, Pliny began to implement the policies as he understood them from the previous practices going back to the time of Domitian and the earlier years of Trajan's rule. Meanwhile, Pliny wrote to Trajan describing his dealings with Christians while asking for guidance from the emperor. From what Pliny says in his correspondence, it is clear that persecutions of the Christians continued from the time of Domitian through the reign of Trajan, even if the rule of Nerva provided a brief respite from the trouble.

Several of Pliny's letters to the emperor have survived, but *Epistula* 10.96 is indispensable for understanding how the Roman governors and the emperor dealt with Christians at the beginning of the second century. Among Pliny's collection of letters, we also have Trajan's response (*Epistula* 10.97) which affirmed Pliny's actions, but also cautioned Pliny not to ambitiously seek out the Christians. There was a danger that anonymous accusations might come from personal animosity and thus disrupt the public order.

At the outset of his letter, Pliny acknowledged that he had never participated in the trials of Christians. However, when Christians were brought before him, Pliny prosecuted them and executed those who were found guilty. It is clear from Pliny's correspondence that there had been an established Roman policy for dealing with Christians. It is not clear how far back in time this policy can be traced but it seems reasonable to assume that the policy took shape during Domitian's reign and continued through Trajan's reign as emperor. The book of Revelation offers somewhat vague details, often couched in symbolic terminology, that give us a glimpse of what transpired during that time.

Pliny took it for granted that the mere confession of the Christian faith was a crime deserving of death. Pliny even asked whether or not apostate Christians who had given up the faith as many as twenty years earlier should be punished. Pliny questioned Trajan whether or not young Christian children should be given mercy. All of this reflects a severe and coldhearted posture that had been established toward Christians in the

²¹Richard Carrier, "The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, 'Annals' 15.44," *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, no. 3 (2014): 266-67.

years leading up to the time when Pliny took office. After his interrogations Pliny acknowledged that these Christians committed no crimes. The apostates who were questioned maintained that the Christians bound themselves with an oath not to commit crimes, not to steal, not to commit adultery, and not to lie. Pliny took this testimony to be true, yet he still believed that Christians should be punished, not because they posed a threat to Roman rule, but simply because of their obstinate refusal to follow the will of the emperor.

Those who had been accused of being Christians but denied that they ever were had to prove their denial by praying to the gods and worshipping their images. In addition, they had to worship an image of the emperor, and they were required to curse Christ. Pliny was aware that Christians may be coerced into worshipping idols, but true Christians would not go so far as to curse Christ. Those people who lied and apostatized were released. For those who confessed that they had been Christians, Pliny offered an opportunity to deny their faith. He claimed that he questioned them a second and third time threatening them with death. Those who persisted in maintaining their faith were executed. Pliny was unsure of how to deal with those who renounced their faith. His question was, Should they be punished for their past participation in this cult?

Through his actions Pliny came to realize the breadth of the problem. He recounted that the disease (as he called it) had spread to persons of all ages, sexes, and social classes. He realized that the faith had spread throughout the cities, villages, and countryside. Pliny was concerned about the large numbers involved in the faith and wrote to Trajan asking him for advice regarding how he should proceed. Pliny suspended the proceedings against the Christians until he heard back from Trajan.

Trajan's response affirmed Pliny's actions. However, Trajan continued by indicating that Pliny should not aggressively pursue the issue by going about looking for Christians. Nevertheless, Trajan stated that Christians who were denounced and found guilty should be punished as Pliny had done. Trajan also indicated that anyone who abandoned the faith should be given mercy and a pardon.

This correspondence between Pliny and Trajan is important not only for insights into what was happening in Bithynia and Pontus, but these letters also give us a glimpse into what was happening elsewhere in the Roman Empire. When Pliny took office in Bithynia, he was familiar with the Roman practice of persecuting and executing Christians. However, Pliny did not know how this practice was to operate in his domain. Pliny had questions about prosecuting young Christians, the Christian nobility, and those who apostatized. By the end of the first century Christianity had sunk deep roots into Asia Minor, Bithynia, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Pontus. The first epistle of Peter was addressed to Christians in these regions (1 Peter 1:1). All five chapters in the letter addressed the problems of Christian persecutions in those provinces and offered advice regarding the Christian response. Pliny mentioned that the faith had spread to all steps of society and was prevalent in the cities as well as in the countryside. With the large number of Christians who represented all levels of society in the province, Pliny was asking Trajan, How far do we go with the intimidation and persecution of these people?

Other letters of Pliny may also refer to the presence of Christians in Bithynia, although the word *Christian* is lacking in these letters. In *Epistula* 10.33 Pliny wrote to Trajan asking permission to establish an association for firemen. The city of Nicomedia had suffered a devastating fire that destroyed two public buildings and several private homes while the people stood by helplessly. Pliny requested Trajan's consent to create a small fireman's association not to exceed 150 people, while guaranteeing that the association would not engage in subversive activities. The Romans were cautious of all associations, fearing that these groups might be involved in surreptitious and seditious activity against the empire. Christian gatherings in particular were looked on with great suspicion. At that time Christianity was a clandestine movement, operating discreetly in society. The Christians refused to venerate the Roman gods, refused to participate in the imperial temples, and secretly met in private homes. There was a concern that groups would use religion as a cover for subversive activities.

Trajan's response (*Epistula* 10.34) was to refuse Pliny's request to establish an association of firemen. Trajan replied that these cities (referring

to Nicomedia and Nicaea) were notorious for creating disturbances through factions like these. Trajan's fear was that they would become a secret brotherhood (*hetaeria*). The Latin term *hetaeria* was used with negative connotations and may be translated "cabals" or "conspirators." The same term was also used in Pliny's above-mentioned letter regarding Christians (*Epistula* 10.96.7). There Pliny claimed that the Christians stopped gathering together after he issued an edict banning the existence of secret brotherhoods (*hetaerias*). Thus, it appears that Trajan's reference to secret brotherhoods in 10.34 was concerned, at least in part, with Christian congregations.²² It is also possible that the persons who were condemned in yet another letter (*Epistula* 10.31) and whose sentences were terminated or reduced to lesser punishments were Christians. Pliny stated that they were currently living respectable and peaceful lives.

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 EARLY MARTYRS FROM NICAEA

Late traditions and hagiographies offer sketchy details for several martyrs in Nicaea and the area. Scholars agree that the details of the lives, trials, and executions of these martyrs were embellished over the centuries until the hagiographies were recorded. Miraculous legends were commonly associated with the accounts surrounding their lives and executions. This was a common development with the apocryphal writings that were written in the centuries following the apostolic period. Yet, it does not follow that these traditions were entirely bereft of any historical content. At a minimum, it can be assumed that the people in some of these accounts were real people who were martyred for their faith. The early Christian communities remembered the names of those who kept the faith and died when so many others apostatized in the face of death.²³

²²Nikos Giannakopoulos, "Groups and Associations in Bithynia and Pontus: Interaction with Prominent Statesmen and Provincial Governors," in *Sencer Şahin Anısına Yazılar* (Istanbul: Kuzgun Yayınevi, 2016), 375n68.

²³It is not surprising that most of these accounts were unwritten. Only about 10 percent of the population was literate during that period. This was a period where oral traditions were passed down from one generation to the next. A common assumption among people today is that oral traditions have a short shelf life. However, at a time when written materials were scarce, memories were more sharp and more enduring. People who have no recourse to draw on written materials have stronger memories than those dependent on the written word. Memories are like muscles; the more they are used, the stronger they become.

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