FROM PAGANISM TO PIETY: TRACING THE CHRISTIANIZATION PROCESS IN THE SOUTHERN BLACK SEA

A Master's Thesis

by
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To my mother

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FROM PAGANISM TO PIETY: TRACING THE CHRISTIANIZATION PROCESS IN THE SOUTHERN BLACK SEA

By Sena Göksu Kolaylı

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Archaeology.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the spread of Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus, a topic that remains a lacuna in the academic literature. Through a multi-dimensional survey that covers textual, hagiographical, epigraphic, and material evidence and engaging with the central debates in archaeology about the identification of religious identity through material remains and the patterns and mechanisms of Christianization, it provides a comprehensive account of the history of Bithynia and Pontus, which it traces in religious and secular texts from the pre-Constantinian period, and discusses specific epigraphic finds and archaeological sites in relation to its central theme as well as challenges related to the preservation and interpretation of evidence and avenues for future research. These findings help contribute the understanding of early Christian identity and its development in the Black Sea region as well as the broader debates on the archaeology of religion and the Christianization of the Asia Minor.

Keywords: Archaeology of Religion, Bithynia, Black Sea, Christianization, Pontus

ÖZET

PAGANİZMDEN DİNDARLIĞA: GÜNEY KARADENİZ'İN HRISTİYANLAŞMASININ İNCELENMESİ

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Aralık 2024

Bu tez, akademik literatürde büyük ölçüde gözardı edilmiş bir konu olan Bithynia ve Pontus'ta Hıristiyanlığın erken dönemini incelemektedir. Hıristiyanlığın bu bölgedeki tarihini metinsel, hagiografik, epigrafik ve maddi kanıtları kapsayan çok boyutlu bir araştırma aracılığıyla ve arkeolojide dini kimliğin maddi kalıntılarla tanımlanması ile Hristiyanlaşma'nın süreçleri ve mekanizmalarına dair kuramsal tartışmalarla etkileşim içinde kapsamlı bir biçimde ele alan bu inceleme, Konstantin öncesi dönemden dini ve seküler metinler ve ana temasıyla ilişkili olarak epigrafik buluntular ve arkeolojik alanlar üzerinden bütüncül bir çerçeve oluşturmaya çalışırken arkeolojik buluntuların korunması ve yorumlanmasına ilişkin kuramsal ve pratik sorunlara da dikkat çekmekte ve gelecekteki araştırmalar için olası istikametlere işaret etmektedir. Bu tezde sunulan bulgular, Karadeniz bölgesindeki erken dönem Hristiyan kimliği ve gelişimi ile birlikte, din arkeolojisi ve Küçük Asya'nın Hristiyanlaşması üzerine daha geniş tartışmalara da katkıda bulunacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bitinya, Din Arkeolojisi, Hıristiyanlaşma, Karadeniz, Pontus

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Question and Methodology

This thesis examines the spread of Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus, a topic that remains a lacuna in the academic literature. Specifically, it seeks to understand when and how Christianity reached and spread in Bithynia and Pontus, and the dynamics that shaped these patterns. The thesis primarily focuses on the pre-Constantinian period but will also explore early Christianity more broadly whenever it is relevant to addressing its central questions.

The thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach. It comprehensively surveys classical texts, hagiographies and martyrologies, ecclesiastical records, epigraphic evidence, and structural remains to identify when and where Christianity was present. Based on this foundation, it is anticipated that a preliminary timeline and geographical pattern of Christianity's spread in Bithynia and Pontus can be reconstructed. This research also engages with broader debates surrounding the identification and interpretation of religious identity through material remains, the patterns and mechanisms that influenced the spread of Christianity, and the specific limitations of archaeological research on late antiquity in the Southern Black Sea.

1.2. Conceptual Framework

This chapter centers on two broader themes integral to this thesis: (i) the identification and inference of religious identity through material remains and (ii) the spread of Christianity, including its patterns and mechanisms. While covering the key debates and approaches, it will also serve a secondary purpose as a review of the literature on these topics as they relate to the scope and project of this thesis.

What can material remains tell us about religious identity? Before setting out to discuss this question, some caveats are necessary about the various ways it could be approached and how its answers would vary by context. As reflected in Christopher Hawkes's "ladder of inference," archaeologists have traditionally tended to think of religion as the "most difficult area of past life to interpret via archaeology" (Insoll, 2005: 34). Contemporary introductory textbooks continue to acknowledge that "[though] sacred objects and places are common in the archaeological record, recognizing them and determining their significance is difficult" (Sutton and Yohe, 2013: 313). Ironically, archaeologists have also tended to revert to religion as "a default category for anything for which we cannot attribute a practical function" (Kitler, 2012: 10). Bahn (1989) has perfectly captured this irony in his humorous definition of ritual as the "all-purpose explanation used where nothing else comes to mind" (62).

There are at least two reasons why this is the case. The first has to do with the logic of inference. Archaeologists recover material evidence, infer behavior on their basis, and then try to make a second to the reasons for the actions, which are based on ideas and beliefs (Kitler, 2012: 11). What we identify through this logical chain is ritual, in the sense of "set activities with a special (not-normal) intention-in-action, and which are specific to a group of people" (Kyriakidis, 2007: 294). Using Joyce Marcus (2007)'s definition, a ritual has the following components: one or more performers, an audience, a location, a purpose, a meaning/subject matter/content, a temporal span, specific actions, and paraphernalia (48). The problem is that rituals can also be secular. For example, by this definition, a football game also qualifies as ritual: performers (i.e., players and referees) performing a specific action (i.e., playing football) using specific paraphernalia (i.e., ball, jerseys, etc.) at a dedicated space (i.e., stadium) in front of an audience (i.e., fans) for specific purpose (i.e., scoring more than you concede) over a predetermined duration (i.e., 90 minutes). Other scholars like Bell (1997), and Renfrew and Bahn (2004) have proposed alternative definitions, though those are not without problems either.

This discussion points at two broader problems. First, intentionality is difficult to determine. To build on the previous analogy, a football game would no longer be a secular ritual if the players believe that they earn divine blessing every time they score. Second, interpretation has its limits. There is no set answer (and, in some cases, no answer at all) as to how one distinguishes the residues of a ritual meal from hearth debris, determine whether an artifact is a votive object or

simply a toy, or decide if a glyph is symbol, art or doodle (Brück, 1999: 316; Kitler, 2012: 15).

We will revisit this discussion shortly, but, before moving forward, it is important to touch upon the second issue about the "definitional uncertainty" of the term religion, which leads archaeologists to "tend to avoid the term except predominantly where historically known or living religions are being considered" (Insoll, 2004: 34). Whitehouse (2004) captures this problem with his definition of religion as "whatever we agree to say it is" (230). To practically alleviate if not theoretically solve this problem, scholars have resorted to a binary distinction between two modes of religiosity: world versus traditional, routinized versus charismatic, literature versus pre-literate (Whitehouse, 2002). Bowie (2000)'s typology – which archaeological scholars (e.g., Insoll, 2004: 8) have also approvingly used – describes world religions as defined by written scriptures, a notion of salvation, potential of universality, the ability to subsume or supplant primal religions, and separation from secular activity whereas primal religions are oral, this-worldly, confined to a single language or ethnicity, prototypical to world religions, and inseparable from social life (26). As Bowie herself attests, such typologies are "at best intellectual constructs rather than descriptions of reality" but they are also "not without utility, or they would not have survived so long" (26).

In this sense, there is a strong case to make for focusing specifically on how we can identify and infer *Christian* religious identity through material remains. In

this context, the distinction Caraher and Pettigrew (2019) draw between "primitive" (30-150 AD) and "early" (150-300 AD) Christianity is a helpful one (12-13). Though there are pre-Constantinian remains, they comprise a very small corpus that has not increased appreciably in recent decades (Caraher and Pettigrew, 2019: 13)[1]. This is mainly because artifacts, architecture, and imagery with a distinctly Christian character do not appear until about 180 AD (Snyder, 2003: 180). The earliest Christian worship-spaces were "house churches (*domus ecclesiae*)" like those in Dura-Europos, Aqaba, and Megiddo. Christians are known to have congregated in other spaces as well — such as tabernae (137-8), barns (146-7), warehouses (149-50), hotels and inns (157-9), bathhouses (171-3), gardens (181-3), watersides (186-8), and burial sites (192-4) – but they are difficult to discover for the very reasons that made them attractive for early Christians: these generic spaces offered privacy and discretion, allowing believers to gather without drawing unwanted attention. Though there is evidence of the early use of Christian symbols like Ichthys and the Cross, that is also limited to secluded spaces such as mortuary settings (e.g., the Catacombs of Rome). Early Christians are used to have these symbols in other forms as well such as scratching crosses on their foreheads, lips or bosom as a covert symbol of private allegiance (Dubois, 1999: 141). Unfortunately, it is not easy to assess material evidence of such instances. For the same reasons, epigraphic evidence is also few and far between. In short, it is by definition a challenge to discover

[1] Caraher and Pettigrew (2019) observes that "*Snyder's 2003 compendium of pre-Constantinian remains is hardly different from the original edition in 1985" (13).*

evidence of a community that actively strove to avoid discovery and evade persecution by its contemporaries.

Additionally, there is also a problem of differentiation. As will be further discussed in the context of epigraphic evidence, there are several examples of the usage of "God-fearer" (φοβούμενοι) and "God-worshipper" (θεοσεβεῖς) also as markers of faith, but it is difficult to determine exactly what these labels implied. There are also the Hypsistarians, who called their God the "Highest" (*hypsistos*) or "Almighty" (*pantokrator*). Mitchell (2016) suggests that these two groups might be the same, and describes their religion as a "quasi-monotheistic worship with beliefs and practices overlapping with those of Jews, whose synagogues they sometimes shared" (686). So, how can an inscription be distinguished as Christian and not pagan or Jewish? The Inscriptiones Christianae Graecae Database (ICG, a database of early Christian inscriptions) identifies five distinctive factors: self-identification, symbolism, language, onomastics, and location. By these factors, there is only one inscription in Bithynia and Pontus that we can identify as pre-Constantinian evidence of Christianity with some degree of confidence: an epitaph from Nicomedia dating to no later than 111 that has a cross symbol hidden into its text. Though there are others that plausibly qualify as Christian, these are dated around or later than Constantine. And, these factors are not a foolproof rubric either as they themselves are subject to interpretation. As remarked earlier, distinguishing a symbol or word or name or place as distinctly Christian is not straightforward either.

Along with these fundamental problems about the theory and method of identification and inference, there are also the historical questions about Christianity. How did Christianity spread? What were the methods and motivations behind its adoption? A crucial tool to leverage for an answer to the macro-level question of how "a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman Empire dislodged classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilization requires" (Stark, 1996: 3) is to study the micro-level histories: How did the faith reach a certain locale? How was it received there? Who embraced or opposed it, and for what reasons?

A central debate regarding these questions has been the direction of spread: top-down or bottom-up? The top-down model has emphasized the importance of elite behavior, especially conversions by rulers – such as Constantine's adoption of Christianity in 312 – which exerted pressure on their subjects to follow suit. In contrast, the bottom-up model focuses on the grassroots, underlining the role of socialization, evangelism, and networks.

The top-down model essentially argues that had Constantine not adopted Christianity as the imperial religion, Christianity would likely have "continued as one option among many in the polytheist world, no better, no worse than others, appealing to a few but hardly to all" (Knapp, 2017: 437). This model of reasoning is most prominently associated with Edward Gibbon's monumental work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which presents Constantine's conversion and his subsequent policies favoring his newly adopted religion as the principal

milestone in Christianity's spread. Subsequent scholarship like Ramsey Macmullen's *Christianizing The Roman Empire* (1984) and Peter Brown's *Rise of Western Christendom* (2012) similarly emphasize the ruling classes albeit with a more nuanced view.

While not ignoring grassroots factors such as social ties, charismatic leadership, and the appeal of miracles, Macmullen (1984) argues these were important primarily for the lower strata, and gives primacy to state power in both positive and negative. Once Constantine formally converted to Christianity, state power began to not only permit the faith but it worked to also actively promote its spread while restricting pagan religion. These active measures included the state support for the building of churches, granting of privileges to church leaders, and the promulgation of laws favoring Christian worship while pagan rituals were suppressed and temples were destroyed. MacMullen (1984) specifically emphasized how the rituals and ceremonies of Christianity began to occupy a greater place in the public sphere to compete with and ultimately replace their pagan counterparts, weaving the religion into the social fabric. As Macmullen observes, though genuine belief surely existed, many elites must have also seen in these transformations an opportunity to enrich and empower themselves, and converted out of a pragmatic adaptation to changing political realities.

Brown (2012) echoes a similar viewpoint, emphasizing Constantine's conversion and Christianity's subsequent transition from a marginalized sect to a state-sponsored religion, but he draws attention to a different class of elites – "holy

men" such as bishops and saints – who not only actively spread the religion and mediated across its various audience but also opened up new avenues for public engagement through their relics, shrines, and pilgrimages. H.A. Drake's Constantine and His Bishops (2002) also deserves mention in this context as an illustration of the monarch's active involvement in ecclesiastical affairs to shape both the structure and the doctrine of the church to better conform to his political objectives.

The converse to this model focuses on the bottom-up processes and emphasizes local agency. The sociological approach, as popularized by Rodney Stark (1996) and Keith Hopkins (2000), provides an example of the bottom-up model. Such studies primarily focus on mass behavior, comparing growth rates across different locales and periods to identify trends and patterns. Another exemplar of this approach is Martin Goodman's *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (1995). Unlike top-down models that emphasize imperial conversion or elite patronage, Goodman underlined Christianity's organic growth in a gradual, cumulative process through social dynamics over centralized efforts with much emphasis on cults, converts, and preachers working at the village or neighborhood level to spread their faith to those around them.

Many scholars including Peter Brown and Robin Lane Fox have also devoted attention to adaptation and syncretism, which presents another instance of local agency. In the course of its spread, Christianity usually blended with local

traditions, and absorbed them into its fold. Robin Lane Fox (1986) describes this phenomenon as "pagan continuity," and discusses how certain aspects of Christian practice such as cults of saints, grave worship, and faith healing had roots in pagan tradition (37). Luke Lavan (2011) has also argued on the basis of archaeological evidence that paganism suffered not a sudden death but a slow decline: though there is evidence of the destruction of pagan temples, such instances are much fewer than once thought and would "probably never reach even a twentieth of all temples active in the Early Roman period" (xxviii). Similarly, despite Constantine's conversion and Christianity's subsequent transition into a state-sponsored religion, "the pagans felt able to participate in public life and have their beliefs widely known without fear of confiscation of property until the late fifth century, and, until the time of Justinian, pagans could be prominent for their learning, or for their wealth, if not in holding political power (lii-liii). Indeed, in the same edited volume, Talloen and Vercauteren (2011) similarly point out that "pagans and paganism continued to appear in literary sources and material culture well into the sixth century" (379) and demonstrate through a survey of material evidence from across Asia Minor that most pagan temples had already fallen into disuse, and they were likelier to have been deconsecrated or dismantled than demolished (380). In such a context, bottom-up agency such as the ceasing of local patronage and popular practice in pagan temples and the syncretization of pagan traditions with Christian teaching assumes greater significance.

That said, it must be cautioned that modern scholarship from Macmullen (1984) and Brown (2012) to Fox (1986) and Fletcher (1999) rarely approaches the top-down and bottom-up models as binary opposites. As opposed to a unidirectional process driven solely by elite authorities or grassroots movements, the spread of Christianity is generally understood as an interaction between top-down imperial power and bottom-up popular conversion, and, when scholars differ on their relative impact, this is usually a difference of degree, not of kind.

A corollary of the top-down/bottom-up debate is the urban-rural debate on whether Christianity spread primarily through cities or the countryside. Broadly speaking, these two debates map on to each other: the top-down model mainly emphasizes imperial authority and elite behavior, who are concentrated in the cities, whereas the bottom-up model underlines local agency such as socialization and syncretization, which is more prominent in the countryside.

Traditionally, the prevailing wisdom has been that Christianity primarily emerged and spread within the urban centers of the Roman Empire and later gradually spread into the countryside. Many leading scholars including W. H. C. Frend (1967), Henry Chadwick (1984), Peter Brown (2012) and Ramsay MacMullen (1984) (as cited in Naerebout, 2021: 21) have subscribed to this viewpoint, which found its definitive account in Wayne Meeks (1983)'s *The First Urban Christians*.

Recent scholarship, however, has challenged the urban hypothesis. Robinson (2016) modeled the most likely scenarios for the growth of early Christian communities and empirically demonstrated that it is mathematically improbable for Christianity to have evolved as primarily an urban phenomenon. Naerebout (2021) similarly concludes that it is "a priori impossible to square the supposedly dominant urban nature of pre-Constantinian Christian communities with an 85 percent rural population, because if you take the number of Christians, usually put at some 10 percent of the total population towards the end of the third century, and the number of town dwellers, here put at around 15 percent, you cannot have all of these Christians, or a majority of them, living in an urban environment" (25). Though the formula might work if a higher degree of urbanization or a lower number of Christians assumed, such scenarios are thwarted by realities such as the absence of more and larger towns and the number of known bishoprics (Naerebout, 2021: 25).

While it is true that most of the literary, epigraphic and archaeological evidence on early Christianity comes from urban settings, it is also true that literacy was a primarily urban phenomenon. "If we have rural Christians," comments Naerebout (2021), "they are not written about and they do not write" (36). He also observes that the invisibility of early Christians might simply have to do with the fact that they were "few and far between": in the urban settings, where only 15 percent of the total population dwelled, Christians would be more visible simply by virtue of proportion, whereas the rural world would be completely dominated by non-Christians even if the nominal number of Christians living in

these areas were actually higher (Naerebout, 2021: 36). Moreover, town and country were more interconnected than the urban/rural debate seems to capture. Though a proponent of the urban thesis, MacMullen (1974) accurately observed that most city-dwellers worked in the countryside and most rural lands were the property of urban elites who also had mansions and estates in these areas (28-56). Interestingly, Naerebout (2021) also writes that "the fact that the divide between town and country that we tend to assume was in fact nonexistent." In this sense, the disagreements between the parties of the urban/rural debate seem to be more minor than commonly believed.
As was previously affirmed about top-down/bottom-up debate, the urban-rural debate is not neatly divided into binary opposites either, and their differences are one of degree, not of kind.

Recent scholarship has increasingly begun to sidestep these traditional debates through innovative empirical methods such as network analysis[2]. Following in the wake of a broader interest in network-based approaches and their incorporation into archaeology (citing such examples as Broodbank, 2000; Bentley and Maschner, 2003; Graham, 2006; Isaksen, 2008; Evans et al., 2009; Knappett 2011; Malkin, 2011; Knappett, 2013), Anna Collar's *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire* imports the empirical method into the substantive question of how new ideas such as religious beliefs spread. "Instead of judging the success of an innovation on an objective quality of the innovation

[2] Pitts and Versluys (2015) offers a novel theoretical framework for this methodological shift, though it does not engage with the subject of religious socialization.

itself," writes Collar (2013), "its success and adoption can rather be viewed as an indication of the connectivity of the network structure in which it happens to be situated" (16). According to Collar (2013), "the adoption of a new religious form and the success or failure of a religious movement can be seen as a result of social interactions" (74). Collar (2013) then proceeds to demonstrate this claim using a specific network-analytical method – proximal point analysis (37-39) – to three separate case studies: the spread of the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus through the community and mobility of military networks (Ch. 3), the role of strong-tie ethnic connectivity in the second-century 'hebraization' of the Jewish Diaspora (Ch. 4), and, building on the same case, the cult of Theos Hypsistos's distancing from the increasingly self-identifying Jews (Ch. 5).

Though Collar (2013)—as well as Concannon (2017), who will be briefly mentioned later in the discussion of Dionysios of Corinth as a textual source and the relationship between geography and connectivity as limitations for this research—provides a framework for a network-based analysis of the Christianization of Bithynia and Pontus, we unfortunately cannot embark on such an ambitious project.

As Collar (2013) herself attests, studies like hers can take two forms: they can either 'simulate where we might find new discoveries' or 'ascertain the connections that explain the distribution patterns of data as we have it,' with the latter being her stated objective (38). The former approach proves especially productive once the proverbial low-hanging fruit has been picked. However, for

the Southern Black Sea, which accounts for less than one percent of archaeological research in Turkey, this is far from the case. Conversely, the latter approach requires a sufficiently rich dataset to analyze patterns and connections using network methods. To illustrate, Collar's (2013) case study of the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus alone builds nearly 430 data points from epigraphic and archaeological evidence (80). For Bithynia and Pontus, there is simply not enough material to support such analyses.

This is a remarkable omission considering the impressive corpus that has accumulated on the archaeology of early Christianity in the world of antiquity (e.g., Elsner, 1995; Nasrallah, 2011) and also specifically in the Asia Minor. Raymond van Dam's Becoming Christian: The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia (2003), and Paul Trebilco's *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (2007), and Paul McKechnie's *Christianizing Asia Minor* (2019) are exemplars that illustrate how multidimensional research combining biblical texts, archaeological evidence, epigraphic material, and historical records shed light on the formation, growth, and challenges of early Christianity. There also edited volumes such as Cilliers Breytenbach and Julien M. Ogereau's *Authority and Identity in Emerging Christianities in Asia Minor and Greece* (2018), Stephen Mitchell and Philipp Pilhofer's *Early Christianity in Asia Minor and Cyprus* (2018), Markus Tiwald and Jürgen Zangenberg's *Early Christian Encounters with Town and Countryside* (2021) have filled a crucial lacunae by combining and synthesizing research engaging with these themes. It is also important to note similar research that has been published on other important

cities outside the Asia Minor like Corinth (Friesen et al., 2010), Philippi (Bakirtzis and Koester, 1998), and Thessalonike (Nasrallah et al., 2010). Unfortunately, Bithynia-Pontus is conspicuously absent from this corpus. Mitchell and Pilhofer (2018) includes no chapter on the region while Öhler's chapters in Breytenbach and Ogereau (2018) and Tiwald and Zangenberg (2021) are narrowly focused on specific topics such as the context of Pliny's letters and how early Christian communities compares to Graeco-Roman associations as opposed to a comprehensive survey of early Christianity on Bithynia and Pontus. Christian Marek offers a slight remedy, especially with his *Pontus et Bithynia* (2003) which includes a chapter dedicated to religion in the region and offers valuable insights such as his case for Amastris as an early center of Christian community, though the specific questions about Christianity's early history that this thesis focuses on are at best a secondary concern for Marek, whose works do not primarily engage with the subject.

This thesis takes a modest step toward addressing this significant gap. The following chapters will systematically survey four bodies of evidence—textual sources, hagiographies and martyrologies, epigraphic evidence, and structural remains (i.e., early churches)—to provide a more unitary (or at least less fragmentary) picture of Christianity across Bithynia and Pontus in the pre-Constantinian era. Admittedly, the ultimate answer to the question "What do we know?" is "not a lot," as the research required for a fuller account faces many limitations, some of which are discussed further in the final chapter.

Nevertheless, the little that we do know will hopefully provide both a roadmap for future research and a foundation upon which it can build.

1.3. Thesis Outline

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter One ("Conceptual Framework") engages with two theoretical debates: the identification and inference of religious identity through material remains and the spread of Christianity, its patterns and mechanisms. It also serves a secondary purpose as a review of the literature on these topics. Chapter Two ("Historical Overview") presents a brief overview of Bithynia and Pontus's history in four short sections leading up to the Constantinian period.

The following two chapters will systematically survey different bodies of evidence. Chapter Three ("Textual Sources") covers classical texts, hagiographies and martyrologies, and participation records from the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) while Chapter Four ("Material Evidence") focuses on epigraphic records and structural remains.

Chapter Five ("Conclusions and Limitations") synthesizes the findings from the previous chapters to present a preliminary timeline and geographical pattern for Christianity's spread in Bithynia and Pontus. It concludes with a discussion of the limitations posed by three interrelated challenges: availability, visibility, and connectivity.

CHAPTER 2 BITHYNIA AND PONTUS: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Before proceeding to textual evidence regarding the Christianization of Bithynia and Pontus, it is essential to present and establish some foundational knowledge about these two provinces and their geography.

2.1.Bithynia and Pontus: Landscapes and Urban Centers

Geographically, Bithynia was located in northwest Anatolia along the southern Black Sea coast, and bordered by Pontus to the east, Mysia to the southwest, and Galatia to the southeast. Strabo identified the rivers Sangarius and Parthenius as its eastern and southern boundaries (*Geography*, 2020/7 BC – AD 23). Key cities included Nicomedia (İzmit), Nicaea (İznik), Prusa (Bursa), Amastris (Amasra), and Heraclea Pontica (Karadeniz Ereğlisi). Pontus, further east, was bordered by Bithynia to the west, Galatia to the southwest, Cappadocia to the south, and Armenia to the east. Both regions were originally sparsely populated, with most cities emerging as Greek colonies along the coast, such as Amisos (Samsun), Sinope (Sinop), Kotyora (Ordu), Cerasus (Giresun), and Trapezus (Trabzon), while notable inland settlements included Zela (Zile), Neocaesarea (Niksar), and Amaseia (Amasya).

In terms of etymology, Bithynia's name derived from Thracian tribes mentioned by Herodotus (c. 430 BC/2009; VII.75), who ruled the region for centuries until Roman conquest. Pontus, from the Greek word for "the sea," originally referred

to the Black Sea and later to the settlements on its southern coast (Moorhouse, 1940). Under Roman rule, "Bithynia and Pontus" became a unified administrative unit from Nero's reign onward.

2.2. Pre-Roman Period: Greek Colonies and Hellenistic (Mithridatic) Period (c.7th-century BC to 62 AD)

Reflecting a broader trend, the Black Sea's pre-Roman history is also among the lesser-known and least studied, especially compared to other parts of the Greek world such as Italy and Sicily (Boardman, 1964: 239; Tsetskhladze, 1998: 7). None of the evidence found of Greek colonies in the Southern Black Sea so far can be dated before 630, though the dearth of archeological research precludes a conclusive verdict (Manoledakis, 2017: 174)[3].

From this period, four sites are known: Sinope (*Sinop*), and Trapezus (*Trabzon*), Amisos (*Samsun*), and Heraclea (*Ereğli*) (Boardman, 1964: 254-5). The first three were founded by the Miletians, while the fourth was a Megarian colony. These colonies were a hub for such goods as timber, mines, and dyes (e.g., miltos), while also serving as a gateway to less accessible regions like Phrygia, Colchis, and Urartu. They also appear to have thrived – for example, Heraclea is known to have sponsored other Megarian colonies such as Callatis and Chersonesos (Boardman, 1964: 255).

[3] The earliest possible date of Greek colonization was a subject of debate among earlier scholars. See Carpenter (1948), Labaree (1957), Cook (1962), and Drews (1976).

Given the insufficiency of archaeological evidence, classical literature provides valuable insights about the early history of Bithynia and Pontus. Homer's *Iliad* (c. 8th century BC/2015) counts the Paphlagonians among Troy's allies and basically locates their territory (II.850-5) while Herodotus's *Histories* (c. 430 BC/2019*)* refers to the four colonies mentioned above as well the various tribes that inhabited the region (see, Figure 1).

Xenophon's *Anabasis* (c. 370 BC/2021*)* sketches a much richer picture of Bithynia and Pontus during this period, identifying many geographical features like capes and rivers and additional cities like Kotyora (V.1.3) and Cerasus (V.3.3) (see Figure 2).

Pseudo-Skylax's Periplus (c. 350 BC) is even more thorough, presenting in greater detail of the geography and settlements of the Southern Black Sea from Khalkedon in the east to Trapezus in the west, though it must be noted that the section devoted to the Black Sea is much shorter and less detailed, and some sites such as Byzantion, Kerasous and Kotyora are either missing or mislabeled, not surprising given that this was mainly a synthesis of previous periploi and not a product of actual exploration (Shipley, 2011: 148-9) (see Figure 3).
Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica* (c. 3rd century BC/2009), from which we learn the famous epic of Jason and the Argonauts, also deserves mention as it provides some additional geographical details. Taken together, these sources offer our best available account on what was known about Bithynia and Pontus in ancient times.

Bithynia and Pontus's Hellenistic period spans from Alexander the Great's death in 323 BC and his empire's among the satrapies to its annexation into Rome during Nero's reign in AD 62. While the broader problems about archaeological scholarship (or, more accurately, the lack thereof) persist in this period as well, but the comparative abundance of literary and epigraphic evidence offers a remedy (Erciyas, 2006: 4-5).

Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to survey this corpus, it would be an omission to not give at least an overview of the more prominent works. Memnon's On Heraclea is possibly the best source on the Bithynian kingdom. Polybius's *Histories* (200-118 BC), Diodorus Siculus's *Universal History* (c. 60-30 BC), and Appian's *Mithridatic Wars* (Book XII of his *Foreign Wars* compilation, c. 145-165 AD) also provide important information in the context of Rome's imperial rise and its eventual expansion into this region. Plutarch's biographical portraiture *Parallel Lives* (c. 75-125 AD) similarly deserves mention as it profiles some leading figures of the Mithridatic Wars such as Sertorius, (Book XII)/ Sulla (Book XV), Lucullus (Book XIX), and Pompey (Book XXI), and offers the most detailed picture of Rome's battles against Mithridates VI. In addition to these political histories, geographical treatises such as Strabo's *Geography* and Arrian's *Periplus* (c. 130 CE) are rich sources on topography and landmarks that also expand our knowledge to previously unexplored regions such as the southeastern coast and Pontic inlands.

In this period, the story bifurcates into two separate trajectories: the Kingdom of Bithynia and Kingdom of Pontus. The Bithynian Kingdom was a middling power that emerged in the vacuum that followed Alexander's death (Paganoni, 2019: 38-9) and briefly enjoyed dominance in the Propontic area, reaching the peak of its power around the time of Prusias I (Paganoni, 2019: 148). Centered around Nicomedia, which bears the name of its Bithynian founder Nicomedes I, the kingdom eventually expanded to include Cius/Prusias ad Mare (*Bursa*), Apamea/Myrleia (*Mudanya),* and Heraclea Pontica (*Ereğli)* under Prusias I (Derow, 2012a: 1231). His son Prusias II even managed to briefly capture Tius/Tieion (Filyos) (Derow, 2012b: 1231). From this point onwards, the Bityhnians suffered through a series of ineffective rulers, military defeats, and succession battles while the Pontics steadily expanded their influence. The final blow came with the First Mithridatic War (89-85 BC): with only two Roman legions present in the Asia Minor, the Bithynians were handily defeated. Though the Romans eventually repelled the Pontic forces, the Bithynian kingdom no longer had a future, and it ceased to exist about a decade later in 74 BC, after Nicomedes IV bequeathed his kingdom to Rome upon his death, further extending control in the region and bringing the Bithynian kingdom to an end (Storey, 1998: 49).

The Pontic Kingdom, east of Bithynia, had a more notable history, especially thanks to Mithridates VI Eupator. The Pontics claimed descent from Darius the Great (Polybius V.43.2; Diodorus XIX.43.2; Appian 16.112; Bosworth & Wheatley, 1998: 160) and emerged after Alexander's death, with Mithridates I

establishing the kingdom in Amastris in 281 BC (McGing, 1986: 16-18). Within a century, they expanded to Sinope, Kotyora, and Kerasous, relying on alliances and marriages with neighbors like the Attalids and Cappadocians (McGing, 1986: 26-37). Before Mithridates VI, they also maintained good relations with Rome, aiding its victories, gaining Phrygia Major, and supporting the Romans in the Third Punic War (McGing, 1986: 36).

Mithridates VI Eupator, Pontus's most memorable monarch, was "one of the most aggressive and determined opponents" of Rome (McGing, 1986: VI). He first expanded along the Black Sea's northern coasts, taking territory from Tanais to the Maeotic Lake (Appian, *Mithridatic Wars*, 15), and later seized the southern coast east of Trapezus to Colchis (Strabo, *Geography*, 12.3.1), Armenia Minor (Strabo, 12.3.28), and parts of Paphlagonia, including cities like Sinope, Amisos, and Amastris. Using diplomacy and marriage, he allied with Cappadocia, Armenia, and Commagene (McGing, 1986: 80). His expansion provoked Rome and its Bithynian allies, leading to the First Mithridatic War, where he swiftly overran opponents, massacred tens of thousands in the Asiatic Vespers, and briefly controlled the Aegean Sea before Sulla defeated him. The Treaty of Dardanus (85 BC) forced Mithridates to relinquish territories and pay indemnities. A second war (83-81 BC) yielded inconclusive results, but in 74 BC, he reinvaded Bithynia, initially succeeding before suffering defeats at Cyzicus and Tigranocerta (69 BC; Matyszak, 2008: 328-344). Though victorious at Zela (67 BC), Mithridates lost decisively at the Battle of the Lycus (66 BC), fled to

Crimea, and died by suicide, reducing Pontus to a Roman client kingdom (Matyszak, 2008: 359-366).

2.3. Roman Period from Pompey to Pliny

Already prior to Nicomedes VI's bequest, Bithynia was already tightly connected to Rome, so it was integrated into the empire with relative ease[4]. Pontus, however, posed a more formidable challenge. Situated at the Roman Empire's easternmost edge with mutinous tribes and unforgiving geography, Pontus was a "periphery within" the Roman Empire throughout its existence (Doonan: 2024, 2). Pompey subsumed Pontus into the same administrative unit as Bithynia and launched an urbanization drive preserving some Mithridatic cities like the capital Amaseia and temple-towns Zela and Comana while also setting up new ones into the newly-gained territories (see Figure 4). He also promulgated the Lex Pompeia, a sort of provincial charter that introduced an "uncharacteristically extensive" set of Roman regulations for the local governance (Marshall, 1968: 107. Also see Kantor, 2020).

Pompey's actions and their motives have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate that unfortunately falls beyond the scope of this thesis[5], though it is

[4] E.g.,Cicero's *De Lege Agraria*, delivered in 63 BC, describes the *publican* class as benefiting from the royal lands in Bithynia (see Jones, 1966: 156).
[5] Previous scholars that have worked on these themes include Mommsen (1857), Frank (1914), Rice-Holmes (1923), Abbott and Johnson (1926), Ormerod and Cary (1932), Fletcher (1939), Jones (1966), Magie (1950), and Scullard (1959), Marshall (1968), Wörrle (1988), Mitchell (1993b), Fernoux (2004), and Kallet-Marx (1995). For a comprehensive overview, see Madsen, 2020: 2-7.

indeed remarkable that he chose not to hand over the region to one or more client kings as was previously done and instead made "a deliberate and extremely ambitious choice that placed the Roman administrative structure under considerable pressure" (Madsen, 2020: 20). Indeed, only three decades later, Antony separated Pontus from Bithynia and transferring it to local dynasts including Mithridates VI's grandson Darius (Marek, 2010: 388-9)[6]. Later, Nero reversed course a second time and reincorporated Pontus into the Roman Empire as a directly governed territory in AD 62 (Griffin, 2000: 108-9).

For our purposes, the Hellenic influence in Pontic cities also deserves mention. The Mithridatic dynasty actively promoted Greek culture (Mitchell: 1993, 32) and employed many Greeks as military, financial or administrative officials, Strabo's family being one example. One of Stark (1996)'s hypotheses about the spread of Christianity was that "Hellenic cities had Christian congregations sooner than did Roman cities" (79), and, aligning with this claim, Marek (2003) offers a strong case for locating some of the earliest Christian communities in and around Amastris (118).

Pliny's correspondence with Trajan highlights the ongoing challenges of governing Bithynia and Pontus decades later. Appointed with extraordinary powers to address corruption and financial mismanagement, Pliny audited at

[6] On this subject, see Frank (1914), Fletcher (1939), Syme (1939), Magie (1950), and Dreizehnter (1975).

least nine cities (Pliny, *Letters*, 610.18.3; Noreña, 2007: 244)[7]. His letters also reveal the fragility of Roman authority in the region, citing legal penalties that were inconsistently enforced (10.31), failed public works projects (10.39), and reluctance to permit even basic forms of civil organization for such purposes as a fire brigade (10.33) or mutual benefit (10.92) in the worry that they might turn political. As Madsen (2009b), many of these examples indicate a systemic problem: local authorities would not have failed their duties in such brazen fashion unless they expected to get away with it (Madsen, 2009b: 55). In an environment where even firemen were viewed with suspicion, it comes as no surprise that the Christians also caught attention.

2.4: Roman period: from Pliny to Constantine (AD 109-313)

From Pompey onwards, Bithynia and Pontus underwent a rapid growth in both the number of new cities and towns and the expansion of the existing ones. The number of urban sites doubled from the end of the Hellenistic period until the end of the Roman period (Pitt, 2016: 1). Even after AD 150 and during the course of the third century, when many parts of Asia Minor, Spain, and Greece saw significant decline, Bithynia and Pontus sustained its growth (Pitt, 2016: 1). In addition to the coastal cities, which maintained their economic and administrative center, the interior plateaus and valleys were also increasingly

[7] These are Prusa (10.17A-B), Nicomedia (10.37), Nicaea (10.39, 84), Claudiopolis (10.39), Byzantium (10.43), Apamea (10.47), Sinope (10.90), Amastris (10.98), and Amisus (10.110) (Noreña, 2007: 244).

settled, bringing previously isolated landscapes into Roman connectivity networks.

In this period, various factors worked in tandem to Bithynia and Pontus's advantage. Urbanization was promoted as a strategy of rule and attracted imperial benefaction for public works projects, though the proliferation of bathhouses and theaters reflects that the adoption and diffusion of Roman culture also served a catalyst (Pitt, 2016: 22-28). Urban development in the region could be compared to a hub-and-spoke model with each urban center sponsoring and monitoring smaller ones tied to it (Pitt, 2016: 22-28). Without heavy-handed interference from the imperial bureaucracy, whose agents in the region were few and far between, settlement patterns and economic networks evolved organically and optimally. These circumstances also enabled provincial elites to adapt to and integrate themselves into the Roman world with remarkable success. This is evident in figures such as Dio Chrysostom, Flavius Arrianus (commonly known as Arrian), and Cassius Dio—local notables from Prusa, Nicomedia, and Nicaea respectively who ascended to the uppermost echelons of the imperial elite (Pitt, 2016: 95).

Successive waves of road construction in the Flavian, Hadrian, Severan, and Diocletian similarly spurred both the growth of existing cities and the establishment of new ones, especially on the inlands, through increased trade and transportation, and elevated certain cities, such as Amaseia, which sat at the nexus of no less than four highways (Marek, 2013: 183; Pitt, 2016: 98). Mitchell

(2013) estimates that the cost of Roman road constructions in Bityhnia and Pontus was no less than 60 million HS, more than the annual military wage bill for the entire empire (126).

These infrastructural investments were driven more by Bithynia and Pontus's strategic military importance than by concerns about authority or connectivity. The region served as a critical staging ground and supply zone, particularly for the Armenian and Euphrates frontiers. Trapezus, in particular, held significant strategic value as a logistics hub, functioning not only as a vital port but also as the northern terminus of a major north-south road linking it to Zeugma. Along this route, four to five legions were stationed at any given time, with troops deployed at both termini and in key cities such as Satala, Melitene, and Samosata (Mitchell, 1993: 130; Pitt, 2016: 188).

This strategic importance also attracted increased imperial attention. Emperors Caracalla and Elagabalus, for instance, wintered in Nicomedia during their eastern campaigns (Pitt, 2016: 100). The presence of troops and military infrastructure likely provided an economic boom to the local economy. Furthermore, much like the imperial bureaucracy, the military offered provincial elites a pathway to rapid integration into the power structure. This is evidenced by figures such as Catilius Longus, Flavonius Rufus, and Cassius Agrippa, who rose to prominence from modest beginnings (Pitt, 2016: 101).

However, Levick (1979) offers a more critical perspective on this relationship, arguing that "Rome had failed to capture the loyalty of ordinary provincials for herself, at least in the eastern half of the empire, and it remained instead with the local polis or tribe" (122). Indeed, local rivalries persisted and occasionally

erupted into open conflict. A notable example is the enduring enmity between Nicomedia and Nicaea, which saw the two cities align with opposing sides during the civil war of AD 193 between Septimius Severus and Pescennius Niger (Levick, 1979: 122).

From a thematic perspective, this period appears to have marked steady growth for Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus, within the context of a pluralistic and competitive religious landscape. Occasional persecutions, such as the martyrdom of Polycarp during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, highlighted the tensions between emerging Christian communities and Roman authorities. The popularity of heterodox sects like the Marcionites and Novatianists underscores Christianity's lack of institutional cohesion at this stage, both organizationally and congregationally. Nonetheless, reflecting the broader patterns of Roman infrastructural development—such as the establishment of cities and roads—Christianity continued.

CHAPTER 3 TEXTUAL EVIDENCE, HAGIOGRAPHIES, AND THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

3.1.Textual Sources

This chapter briefly surveys the earliest evidence in textual sources attesting to Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus in three sections. The first section discusses five specific texts: the Acts of the Apostles, Pliny's letters to Trajan, Lucian's Alexander or the False Prophet, Dionysios of Corinth's letters to Nicomedia and Amastris, and Gregory of Neocaesarea's Epistola Canonica. The second section covers information from the lives of saints and martyrs, specifically focusing on three figures: Saint Phocas of Sinope, Saint Eugenios of Trebizond, and the Nicomedian martrys (i.e., Gorgonius and his companions). The final section briefly covers the records of the Concil of Nicaea (AD 325), specifically focusing on the geographical distribution of the bishops in attendance.

3.1.1.Acts of the Apostles

The earliest mention of Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus is found in a biblical source, the *Acts of the Apostles*. The Acts focuses on the evangelism of two apostles, Saint Peter and Saint Paul. In Acts 2:9-11, Saint Peter counts Pontus among the places where "we hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God." Another mention is found in the First Epistle of Peter (English Standard Version Bible; 1 Peter 1), where Pontus and Bithynia are listed among

the places where Peter traveled to spread the faith. Taken together, these two data points offer the earliest evidence of Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus. Later sources allege that Saint Andrew also evangelized in this region, though this claim lacks Biblical basis (Kaçar, 2008: 199).

Reflecting the broader debates on the historicity of the Bible, the reliability of these accounts is also subject to debate. Early-twentieth-century scholars like Ferdinand Christian Baur and Adolf von Harnack had questioned the authenticity of the Acts. Recent scholarship, however, evolved in a more sympathetic direction, especially in wake of Gerd Lüdemann (1989)'s research, which offered a strong case in their defense (Lüdemann, 1989). Most recently, Charles Talbert (2003) conducted his own assessment of the Acts and concluded that "enough corroborating data has been assembled already by scholars to enable one to conclude that Acts is not mere fiction and that its record is reasonably reliable in areas where it can be checked" while also accepting that "there are enough unchecked areas and enough problems in areas that can be checked to keep professors and graduate students in work for the indefinite future." (Talbert, 2003: 230).

On this basis, it appears safe to say that the Acts may have partial, if not total, accuracy, though determining whether the apostles actually visited Bithynia and Pontus as the Bible suggests is arguably a very minor point in the broader scope of our question. The biblical evidence is tangential at best — only two references made in passing — and it is nearly impossible to empirically authenticate their

veracity. Even if it is accepted that there is sufficient grounds to not dismiss the possibility outright as historically inaccurate, this would make only a minor contribution to our understanding of the early history of Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus.

3.1.2.Pliny's Letter to Trajan

Pliny the Younger's correspondence with Emperor Trajan provides the earliest verifiable, precisely dated, and geographically located evidence of Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus.

Caius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, famously known as Pliny the Younger, was appointed governor of Bithynia and Pontus in 109. Bithynia and Pontus had "an unattractively long history of corrupt Roman administration" (Gibson, 2020: 197). With seven governors put on trial, it has the highest number of known prosecutions for maladministration between Augustus and Trajan (Gibson, 2020: 197). This roster includes one of Pliny's own probable ancestors and two of his gubernatorial predecessors, Julius Bassus and Varenus Rufus (Gibson, 2020:197-9). Pliny had even served as one of the counsels defending Bassus against Rufus, the prosecutor who later assumed the same position and met the same fate as his former plaintiff (Bennett, 1997: 116). Suffering under corruption and maladministration, a group of despairing Bithynian citizens had petitioned

Trajan to fix the province's issues, and he had replied by dispatching one of his most trusted hands: Pliny[8] (Jackson, 2022: 177).

By the time of his appointment, Pliny had already distinguished himself: he had served as a suffect consul, head of the treasury, and a member of the imperial consilium (Jackson, 2022: 178). His appointment was also rather extraordinary: though Bithynia and Pontus was a public province that normally fell under the immediate responsibility of the Senate, Pliny was to act as an imperial governor on behalf of Trajan (Jackson, 2022: 178). In one of his letters, Pliny additionally discloses that he was to retain the post indefinitely at the emperor's discretion, further reinforcing that his special mandate (Baz, 2013: 266).

Pliny's attachment to imperial authority and the emperor's personal involvement in the decisions resulted in a situation that Millar (2006) describes as "government by correspondence" (363-83). Pliny's many letters, providing an richly detailed picture of the provincial administration, also include one dated to the second year of his governorship concerning a request for imperial guidance on how to handle the Christians. This letter is also the earliest authenticable evidence of Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus.

The Pliny-Trajan exchange has elicited debate on the grounds and motivation for the persecution of Christians. Adrien Sherwin-White (1952, 1964) and Geoffrey

[8] The precise date of Pliny's tenure is unclear; 109–111, 110–112 and 111–113 are all possible. See footnote 1 in Corke-Webster (2017): 371.

de Ste Croix (1963, 1964) have influentially discussed whether Christianity was persecuted as an ordinary criminal activity or a threat to traditional religious practice. Timothy Barnes (1968) later argued out that Pliny's request actually concerns a technicality: Pliny was certain to either execute the Christians or send them to Rome for trial depending on if they were citizens or not, but he was unsure as to the fate of the "recanters," which is why he sought Trajan's guidance.

Recently, Corke-Webster contended that previous scholars have erroneously overemphasized the religious dimension of Pliny's letter and its influence in the subsequent treatment of Christians (2017: 374-5). Instead, he reinterpreted the letter simply as a provincial governor's attempts to "shut down an apparently minor local situation that has begun to run away from him" (Corke-Webster, 2017: 375). By the time he wrote to Trajan, Pliny had already adopted "a shoot-first policy because he is dealing with a small number of troublesome non-citizens who have affirmed their membership of a sketchy association" (Corke-Webster, 2017: 383). Indeed, other letters evidence Pliny's general anxiety towards permitting any sort of civil organization such as a fire brigade in Nicomedia (10.33) and a benefit society in Amisus (10.93) (Pliny, Letters of the Younger Pliny, 1963).

It appears likely that, as the accusations proliferated and the persecution intensified, Pliny felt the need to seek the emperor's approval. Gibson (2020) suggests that Pliny would have had reason to worry about the same fate as his

gubernatorial predecessors in case some of the Roman citizens sent from Pontus for trial turned out to be well connected in the capital or his actions ended up being seen as criminally violent and liable for prosecution, as happened to other governors such as Marius Priscus in Africa and Caecilis Classicus in Baetica (220). Corke-Webster's (2017) theory lends further credence by the fact that Pliny was unconcerned by the actual beliefs of the Christians and unclear as to the character of their crime and Trajan responded by instructing that Christians "should not be sought out" (393).

At a bare minimum, however, Pliny's correspondence with Trajan affirms that by the time of his gubernatorial tenure at around 110, Christians in Bithynia and Pontus had reached enough visibility to attract administrative attention. Indeed, Pliny notes that some of the Christians he interrogated claimed to have abandoned the faith nearly twenty years earlier, potentially suggesting an even earlier presence of Christianity, but it appears that the phenomenon itself was not so widespread and consequential that a standard procedure was already in place and a provincial governor would readily know how to react to it.

3.1.3.Lucian's Alexander or the False Prophet

The transition from paganism to Christianity was not clear-cut. Consequently, deities and rituals of the old and the new co-existed and hybridized with each other for several centuries, as perfectly illustrated by Lucian's *Alexander*, the adversarial portrait of a false prophet that became immensely popular at this time.

Its namesake Alexander of Abonuteichos was the disciple of another false prophet, Apollonius of Tyana (Costa, 2005: 131). He had later returned to his hometown, a coastal town in Paphlagonia, and launched his own cult to snake-god Glycon, which was allegedly Asclepius incarnate and speaking through Alexander (Costa, 2005: 134-5). Lucian alleges that Alexander was a charlatan and his entire act was an elaborate fraud, writing that Alexander foamed his mouth during oracles by chewing the root of soapwort, while his supposed snake-god was actually a sock-puppet made of horsehair and linen (Costa, 2005: 134).

Nonetheless, Alexander's fame and influence spread widely. He married his daughter to Rutilianus, the governor of Asia (Costa, 2005: 142) and consulted (unsuccessfully, Lucian alleges) by the emperor Marcus Aurelius during the Quadic wars (Costa, 2005: 146). Lucian writes that Alexander even "request[ed] the emperor to change the name of Abonuteichos and call it Ionopolis, and to mint a new coin, engraved on one side with the image of Glycon and on the other with that of Alexander" (Costa, 2005: 150). Archaeological evidence also attests to the prevalence of the cult of Glycon survived for some time: statues and inscriptions honoring the snake-god were found as far as Dacia, its likeness was displayed in civic coinage of cities in Galatia and Bithynia long after the false prophet's death, and archaeological material shows evidence of oracles from and pilgrims to Abonuteichos in such faraway cities as Tomis in Moesia and Doryleum in Phyrgia (Fox, 1986: 410).

Lucian's account stands out for two reasons. Firstly, it is possible to date it with some certitude. Lucian claims to have personally visited Abonuteichos to prosecute Alexander only be "restrained by Avitus, the then-governor of Bithynia and Pontus, who practically begged and besought me to lay off, because out of goodwill to Rutilianus he could not punish Alexander, however clearly his guilt was proved" (Costa, 2005: 150). Piecing together epigraphic evidence on Avitus's tenure and details from the rest of Lucian's writings, it is possible to identify the late summer of 161 as the terminus post quem for Lucian's visit to Abonuteichos (Flinterman, 1997: 282).

Secondly, Lucian's *Alexander* provides not only a glimpse into the religious life in Bithynia and Pontus but also includes a brief mention about the presence of Christianity, with the remark that Alexander lambasted his detractors as "atheists and Christians" (138). Had the Christians not had a certain size and influence, it would not have made sense for Alexander to accuse his critics of being one of them. Indeed, from around the same time, we have an additional piece of evidence about Christianity even further to the east: Eusebius's passing mention of an alleged letter from the church of Smyrna to the "churches of Pontus" about the martyrdom of its leader, Polycarp, which is believed to have occurred with the same decade (*Ecclesiastical Histor*y, 4.15).

At the same time, however, it is also apparent that Christianity was still one option among many and paganism remained vibrant, as evidenced by both

Lucian's discussion of Alexander's rivalry with Lepidus of Amastris and the Epicureans in general and other contemporary sources such as Hippolytus's Commentary on Daniel, written sometime between AD 202 and 212, which recounts in passing the case of an apocalyptic doomsayer that emerged in Bithynia and Pontus and attracted many followers who left their fields and sold their possessions, only to find themselves destitute and disgraced once their oracle proved a fraud (Öhler, 2021: 293).

3.1.4.Dionysios of Corinth's Letters

Dionysios of Corinth was during his time "famous enough that his advice was requested from as far as the Black Sea and his letters were tampered with by those seeking to lend his authority to their theological positions" but he is "rarely mentioned or discussed in the history of second-century Christianity" (Concannon, 2017: 2). Almost the totality of our information about him comes from Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History,* which retells nine letters that Dionysios authored as bishop. One of these letters includes a mention of Soter as the then-bishop of Rome, which allows for their dating to circa 164 to 174 (Concannon, 2017: 2).

Two of Dionysios's nine letters were addressed to the cities of Nicomedia and Amastris in Bithynia and Pontus. Both were concerning the leading heretic of the time, Marcion of Sinope. Other church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius have penned polemics against

Marcion (Lampe, 2003: 250-1). On this basis, it can be concluded that the Marcionites had achieved considerable reach.

Unfortunately, there is no direct evidence on Marcion's life and teachings. Though Marcion is often associated with Sinope, this notion originated with Epiphanius wheras others simply described him as having hailed from Pontus, leading Concannon (2017) to suggest that this might simply have been an assumption based on the fact that Sinope was Pontus's largest and most important city (99). Tertullian and Eusebius write that Marcion was a *naukleros* — ship owner — who were a financially affluent, politically privileged, and well-connected community (Lampe, 2003: 241-3). Indeed, Marcion is known to have donated 200,000 sesterces — the equivalent to 50 hectares of farmland or half the minimum fortune of a Roman equestrian — upon his admission to the Roman church circa 140 CE, which testifies to his wealth (Lampe, 2003: 245). Following his excommunication four years later, Marcion launched his own sect which gained a foothold in all provinces by the 150s and made him the principal danger for the established church (Lampe, 2003: 250).

The entirety of the information on Dionysios's letters to Nicomedia and Amastris consists of four sentences. "*There is another letter of his carried to the Nicomedians, in which he attacks the heresy of Marcion and in which he stands by the canon of the truth,*" writes Eusebius on the former letter (Eusebius 4.23.4 as cited in Concannon, 2017: 235). The latter he describes as follows: "*And writing to the assembly gathered at Amastris, along with the others in Pontus,*

he mentions Bacchylides and Elpistos as those who have urged him to write, and provides interpretations of the divine scriptures, making mention of their bishop Palmas by name. He also gives them much advice concerning marriage and chastity. And he commands them to receive those who return from some sort of falling, either from fault or from even heretical error" (Eusebius 4.23.6 in Concannon, 2017: 235-6).

Though little is known about their content, the letter to Nicomedia appears to have been brief and impersonal, which leads Concannon (2017) to speculate that Dionysios might have written it simply of economic convenience. Traveling from Corinth to Amastris by the sea took about three weeks, covered more than 1,600 kilometers, required a number of boat transfers, and involved a considerable expense (Concannon, 2017: 109). The cheapest and easiest route from Corinth to Amastris passed through the regional capital Nicomedia, so Concannon (2017) surmises that Dionysios might have simply "dispatched an extra letter that could be dropped off in Nicomedia" since "combining the two costs would make a great deal of sense" (104-5).

In contrast, the letter to Amastris illustrates some interesting details. For example, it was instigated by two locals from Amastris who were visitors at Corinth, which testifies to Corinth's connectivity with Bithynia and Pontus. Secondly, the indication that Dionysios's letter was intended for not only Amastris but also others in the Pontus affirms the existence of other Christian communities in the region. That Dionysios writes to Amastris to reach out to the

broader region and demonstrates acquaintance with the local bishop (i.e., Palmas) also provides circumstantial evidence for Marek (2003)'s previously mentioned argument that some of the earliest Christian communities were located in and around Amastris (118).

3.1.5. Gregory of Neocaesarea's Epistola Canonica

The bishop of the Pontic metropolis of Neocaesarea from about 240 to 270, Gregory (also known as *Thaumaturgus* or Wonderworker) is an important figure for this paper's purposes as the figure traditionally credited with the Christianization of Pontus, especially through his missionary work among the peasants in the rural districts (van Dam, 1982: 274). A student of Origen and the teacher of Gregory of Nissa, who memorialized him in his *Life of Gregory,* Gregory allegedly turned a small congregation of only seventeen Christians into a community where only seventeen pagans reportedly remained by the end of his tenure around 270 (Mitchell, 1999: 53). This number is more a figure of speech than historical fact, invented by later writers to praise a church father, but it is apparent that Gregory of Neocaesarea's tenure coincided with the Christianization of the Pontic hinterland.

Though there are lingering questions about the authenticity of most writings attributed to Gregory of Neocaesarea, the *Epistola Canonica* (Canonical Letter) has been judged as original by both Robin Lane Fox (1986: 539-45) and Stephen Mitchell (1999: 107-8). Indeed, the letter carries contemporary color, reflecting the political environment of its time and the challenges facing a nascent church.

Written during the barbarian raids in the mid 3rd century, likely in response to a request for instructions from a neighboring prelate, it lays out theological responses for social problems raised by the raids and the ensuing anarchy such as Christians who had wittingly or otherwise eaten sacrificial meat, (Canon 1), girls who had been raped by the invaders (Canon 1), local people who had seized property from their neighbors (Canons 3 and 4) and penance and communion for those that have renounced their faith (Canons 7 and 10) (see Mitchell, 1999: 106).

3.2. Saints and Martyrs

An additional source of evidence is the texts on the lives of saints and martyrs. Without an institutionalized structure, personal charisma played an important role in Christianity's early growth and the morale and motivation of its adherents. Saints and martyrs were especially important in this regard as profiles of devotion and sacrifice in the face of adversity, promoted as role-models to emulate.

3.2.1.Saint Phocas of Sinope

The first bishop of Sinope and the patron saint of mariners and merchants, Saint Phocas of Sinope is believed to have been martyred during the Trajanic prosecutions (Leemans, 2003: 11). Details about Saint Phokas's identity remain uncertain with conflicting accounts about his life and background. In addition to Sinope, Saint Phocas is variously identified as "the Gardener" and "of Antioch"

Whether these Phocases were the same individual or not remains an open question. In a sermon dating from about 400, Bishop Asterius of Amasea (whose see also covered Sinope) speaks of Phocas the Gardener without any mention of his being a bishop (Brock, 2013: 2). Similarly, the Synaxarium Constantinopolitanum commemorates “the Bishop” and “the Gardener” as two separate saints (Brock, 2013: 2-3). Similarly, the Antiochene connection has been credited to misattribution in the Martyrologium Hieronymianum, based on the presence of Phocas of Sinope’s relics in Sinope (Brock, 2013: 4). Subsequent scholarship by Van de Vorst (1911), Bryer and Winfield (1985), and Dehandschutter (2003) has generally subscribed to the single-person theory, suggesting that the differing accounts reflect different stages in the saint's life.

The earliest mentions of Saint Phocas are found in Bishop Asterios of Amaseia (c. 330-420) and John Chrysostom (c. 347-407). Not much is known about Asterios. The exact date of his homily on Phocas is also uncertain, though contextual evidence suggests that it must be from after AD 400 during his tenure as bishop (Dehandschutter, 2003: 163). According to Asterios’s homily, Phocas “was born in Sinope, not far from here [Amaseia], an ancient city of fame, abounding in valiant people and philosophers” (*On Phocas,* 5.1 in Dehandschutter, 2003: 172). As mentioned earlier, Asterios affirms Phocas's epithet as a gardener, noting that he "had a piece of land he owned before the city gate, on the isthmus, where he diligently exercised his trade, providing for himself and the needy" (On Phocas, 5.1 in Dehandschutter, 2003: 169). Asterios also praises Phocas’s virtues, likening his hospitality to that of the Biblical Lot

(On Phocas, 5.2 in Dehandschutter, 2003: 170). This theme reappears in Asterios's romanticized account of Phocas's martyrdom: as soldiers search for Phocas, they stop by his house. Neither recognizing him nor being known by him, Phocas entertains them with hospitality. When they reveal their mission, he kindly offers to help, requesting one day to prepare his grave before voluntarily surrendering himself to his executioners (On Phocas, 7.1-8.1 in Dehandschutter, 2003: 170-1).

Asterios affirms Phocas's enduring influence: "The most uncultivated Scythes who inhabit the other side of the Euxine and dwell on the banks of the Maiotis and the Tanais river, also those who occupy the Bosphorus, stretching out until the Phasis river, all of them accompany as guards our gardener" (*On Phocas,* 12.1 in Dehandschutter, 2003: 172-3). Indeed, Phocas's cult remained especially popular across the Southern Black Sea, "Sinopitans dedicated a share of wheat to it and there was an annual *panegyris* in the patron's honor" (Bryer and Winfield, 1985: 71). There was also a sanctuary dedicated to Saint Phocas in Sinope that attracted people from every country (*On Phocas,* 9.1 in Dehandschutter, 2003: 171). A 14th-century text by Andrew Libadenos similarly mentions a church built in his honor by "Alexios the Grand Komnenos," probably the Trapezuntine emperor Alexios III Komnenos (Baldwin, Kazhdan, and Nelson, 1991: 1057). None of these sites have been discovered to date, although Köroğlu (2023) suggests that the Balatlar Church was likely dedicated to Phocas and may have been located at the site of the original sanctuary.

Unfortunately, these claims, which will be discussed further in the next chapter, remain speculative at present (15).

Additionally, the Hermitage Museum houses a terracotta amulet of St. Phocas, an early Byzantine pilgrim souvenir known as a *eulogia* token (Figure 5). Discovered in Chersonesus, this amulet serves as a tangible reminder of the widespread and enduring veneration of St. Phocas around the Black Sea. The token bears an inscription that reads, "Blessing of St. Phocas of the Poor House of Chersonesus," with the saint depicted centrally on the stamp, raising his arms in prayer. On his right is a small ship with oars and rudder, and on his left, a farming tool (Vikan, 1982: 13; Yılmaz and Gür, 2016: 4). In this context, it is worth noting that the regional spread of veneration for Saint Phocas was likely facilitated by sailors, who revered him as their patron saint. Asterios writes that sailors believed Saint Phocas delivered them from storms and followed a tradition of serving a plate for him during meals. One of the sailors would then purchase the plate, and the money would be donated to the needy (On Phocas, 11.1 in Dehandschutter, 2003: 172).

The second source on Phocas is John Chrysostom, the bishop of Constantinople circa AD 398 and 404. One of the most renowned figures of the Byzantine church, Chrysostom left behind a rich corpus comprising sixteen treatises, about 820 homilies, two-hundred-and-forty-five letters, five commentaries, and various fragments (Dehandschutter, 2003: 111). He was also a popular preacher who regularly organized psalm-singing processions in public space and on open

streets (Andrade, 2010: 169). Indeed, violent demonstrations erupted in Constantinople following John Chrysostom's ouster at the Synod of the Oak in July 403 and his subsequent banishment, first to Caucus in Cappadocia and later to Pityous in the Caucasus. He died in 407 during the arduous journey to his final place of exile (Mayer and Allen, 2000: 10).

The Byzantines venerated the relics of saints and martyrs, which they believed to have protective powers, and amassed a considerable collection of them (Klein, 2006). Constantinople lacked its own saints, which also added to the importance of relics (Mayer, 2006: 75). John Chrysostom's homily was delivered in the presence of the emperor and the empress on the occasion of the acquisition of Saint Phocas's relics. These spectacular ceremonies were attended by large crowds of elites and commoners alike with royals also attending: Phocas's remains, for example, were received with a two-day procession including escort by a lamp-lit flotilla of boats sailing down the Bosphorus (Mayer, 2006: 75). Though its exact date is uncertain, John Chrysostom's homily on Saint Phocas is dated to *terminus post quem* 9 January 400 (Mayer, 2006: 75). Unfortunately, Chrysostom's homily is essentially a politically charged polemic against the heretics of the period and does not much about Phocas's person or deeds in the context that concerns us other than reflecting the saint's continued veneration.

3.2.2. The Nicomedian Martyrs (Dorotheus and his companions, Bishop Anthimus, and others)

Several martyrdoms are recounted in the historical accounts of the persecutions against Christians under Diocletian as well as his successor Maximian. Before going into detail on these individuals, it would be helpful to briefly provide context on the Diocletian persecutions and how they were set into motion. Diocletian was initially tolerant of the Christians, who not only peacefully coexisted with the pagans, but actually saw their congregations grow in both size and influence. Eusebius lengthily discusses this period, writing that the Christians enjoyed considerable liberties, and their deity and faith received respect and honor from both Greeks and barbarians (*Ecclesiastical Histor*y, 8.1.7). To prove this point, he testifies that there were many Christians in positions of power including as governors (albeit providing no information of who they were). Indeed, as discussed below, some martyrs of the Diocletianic persecution are said to have been senior officials at the imperial court.

Eusebius assigns the blame of this devolution from peace to violence to the Christians, describing it as divine judgment that they brought upon themselves: "we sank into negligence and sloth, one envying and reviling another in different ways," writes Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History*, 8.1.7), "we were almost on the point of taking up arms against each other, assailing each other with words as with darts and spears" (*Ecclesiastical History,* 8.1.7). This account hints that disarray within the Christian community likely played a role. Unfortunately, we have no details on the context Eusebius describes, though it must be noted that some elements such as the First Edict's relative moderation and accounts of Galerius's incitement imply that elite factions and political

power were crucial factors. Unfortunately, Eusebius provides no details about the context he describes. However, certain elements—such as the relative moderation of the First Edict and accounts of Galerius's influence—suggest that elite factions and political power dynamics played a critical role. The First Edict mandated the confiscation of all church properties, which plausibly indicates the existence of a substantial ecclesiastical portfolio (e.g., Texier, 1864: 50). It also stripped imperial civil servants who refused to renounce Christianity of their legal rights, effectively reducing them to the status of slaves, though this penalty did not extend to ordinary citizens.The persecution escalated progressively, with each of the three subsequent edicts becoming increasingly severe.

According to both Eusebius and Lactantius, the effective cause that started persecutions was a specific episode that Kyrtatas (2020) terms the "first negative encounter". After returning victoriously from a battle with the Persians, Diocletian had ordered a haruspicy reading that went awry – the Christians in Diocletian's retinue refused to partake in this pagan ritual; instead, they "stood by and put the immortal sign on their foreheads" which led the soothsayers objected that they could not perform divination because of the presence of "profane persons who obstruct the rites" (Kyrtatas, 2020: 164). The emperor, angered by the episode and goaded by Galerius, ordered all his courtiers to perform sacrifices and threatened retribution against those that refused (Kyrtatas, 2020: 164). Diocletian was initially hesitant to embark on a mass campaign, worried that it would incite popular unrest, but he ultimately relented under pressure: A soothsayer was dispatched to the oracle of Apollo in Miletus,

who soon returned with the news that the gods desired the persecution of Christians (Kyrtatas, 2020: 165). Thus began a campaign of massive repression.

As discussed later in this thesis, the initial sites of the Diocletianic persecution – the imperial palace and the principal church in Nicomedia – were also the scene of several martyrdoms. One of them was the anonymous martyr (identified in later martryologies such as the Martyrologium Syriacum as Evethius of Nicomedia; see Mullen, 2004: 125) whose act of defiance at the Church of Nicomedia is narrated in Eusebius and Lactantius, and revisited later in this thesis in the context of the church. Unfortunately, little is known about this individual.

Another group of martyrs was a trio of court officials: Dorotheus, Gorgonius, and Peter. These individuals are often described as holding senior positions in the imperial household with Dorotheus ranking above the other two, perhaps as first chamberlain, though their exact offices remain unknown (e.g., Butler, 1900: 1-21). Indeed, Peter's name is often accompanied in the sources with the epithet *cubicularius*, meaning butler or valet. Considering that Diocletian's palace in Nicomedia and the church right across from it were the places where the persecution began, this trio is likely to have been among the first victims of the Diocletianic Persecution. According to Eusebius, Peter's death was especially gruesome: he was "scourged, having vinegar and salt poured on his wounds, and placed on a gridiron over fire" (8.6.3). The principal source on these individuals – Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* (8.5-6) – unfortunately provides little

information on their lives except praising them as dedicated servants and resolute believers with exemplary courage and virtue (8.1.4).

Occasionally, this trio is mentioned along with other figures such as Mardonius and Migdonius, also reportedly members of the imperial court who refused to renounce their faith and died as a consequence (Tougher, 2020: 113)[9]. The sources, however, most consistently refer to Dorotheus, Gorgonius, and Peter, and describe that they were slain alongside anonymous "companions," whose ranks perhaps included those like Mardonius and Migdonius, though it cannot be known with certainty. To give a typical example, the *Paschal Chronicle* (or Easter Chronicle, compiled in the first half of the 7th century at Constantinople, only recounts Dorotheus and Gorgonius, not even Peter, and writes that "[Dorotheus and Gorgonius] met their end at that time, together with many others from the imperial retinue, and a great choir of martyrs was manifested together."

Despite the scant details available on these martyrs, there are at least two aspects that warrant attention. Firstly, as chamberlains to the monarch, they appear to have belonged in the same specific faction within the palace elite. Had other notables of equal or greater stature such as royals, governors or generals also been slain, it is likely if not certain that their names would also have been

[9] Dorotheus and his companions Gorgonius and Peter, Mardonius and Migdonius, and Domna's brother Indes are described in Symeon Metaphrastes's Passio of Saints Indes and Domna as the Christian eunuchs of the palace whose arrest is mentioned by Eusebius and Lactantius (See Tougher, 2020: 113).

preserved. Secondly, Eusebius remarks that “their bodies were thrown into the sea lest Christians worship them as gods” (Ecclesiastical History, 8.5.6 as cited in Oxford University Cults of Saints in Late Antiquity Online Database). This is noteworthy for it implies that Diocletian, at least initially, did not set out to totally eliminate the Christians. Had this not been the case, Diocletian would not have worried about the graves of these martyrs becoming places of worship in the future, for he would have intended for there to be no Christians in the future. This assertion also finds backing in the substantive evolution from the four edicts, which have gotten progressively harsher. Interestingly, despite the account of Eusebius, the Cathedral of Minden in Germany, dedicated to saints Gorgonius and Peter, houses a relic of Gorgonius of Nicomedia, it is believed that Christians likely retrieved the bodies of the martyrs (Van Hooff, 1899: 5).

An interesting remain to note in this context is an epitaph discovered in Nicomedia dating to the fourth century, bilingually written in both Greek and Latin, commemorating Octimos, the young son of a high-ranking member of the imperial guard. The inscription reads as follows (Nowakowski, 2015):

Φλ. Μαξιμῖνος σκουτ[ά-]	Fla(vius) Maximinus scu-	Fla(vius) Maximinus, shield-bearer
ριος σινάτωρ ἀνέστη-	tarius sinator levavi sta-	senator, erected a pillar

σα τὴν στίλλην τῷ υἱῷ	tu(am) filio meo Octemo	to my son Octimos
μου Ὀκτίμῳ ζήσαντι	vixit an	who lived
ἔτη ε΄, ἡμέρας ιε΄· τμηθὶς	nos V, dies XV	5 years, 15 days
ὑπὸ ἰατροῦ ἐμαρτύρησεν	precisus a medico *ic postus est ad martyres*	passed away under a physician's care *and is placed near the martyrs*

The inscription has been the subject of scholarly debate over the phrase *ad martyres* ("near the martyrs"). Whereas the Greek ἐμαρτύρησεν translates closer to "died a martyr" and likely alludes to the boy's sufferings, Latin *ad martyres* implies proximity. This phrasing, combined with the inscription's discovery on a hill that local tradition associates with Gorgonius and his companions, led early scholars to suggest a geographical connection. Contemporary scholarship, however, dismisses this interpretation as implausible (Boulhol, 1994: 926-7).

In addition to Dorotheus and his companions, another prominent martyr Bishop Anthimus of Nicomedia. As the preeminent Christian of the imperial capital, Anthimus presumably enjoyed significant influence. Indeed, he is the first and

only Nicomedian bishop whose name we know until after the persecutions (Kyrtatas, 2020). There are records of bishops from other important sees, but no mention of another bishop in Nicomedia for more longer, a possible indication of how severely the Nicomedian congregation was persecuted (Kyrtatas, 2020).

Unfortunately, the circumstances of Anthimus's martyrdom remains murky. Indeed, it is even plausible that the incident actually took place during the reign of Maximian, not Diocletian: though the Paschal Chronicle dates Anthimus's martyrdom to 303, a fragmentary letter that Lucian of Antioch wrote from prison in Nicomedia describes it as having recently occurred, and, since Lucian's martyrdom can be accurately dated to 7 January 312, Anthimus's martyrdom would be inaccurately dated (Logan, 2000: 96). Both Eusebius and Lactantius attribute Bishop Anthimus's martyrdom with a fire that broke out at the imperial palace shortly after the First Edict, allegedly as a plot by Galerius to create a pretense to intensify the persecutions. Anthimus was martyred by beheading in the crackdown that ensued, along with others – presumably, congregants – who met a similar fate. Bishop Anthimus's martyrdom is also mentioned in the Paschal Chronicle, though without the backstory.

There are minor saints that were martyred in or otherwise connected to Nicomedia. These include Saint Panteleimon, a physician convert who became famous for healing the poor and sick for free (Gerstel, 2012: 176-7); Saint

Domna, a pagan-turned-Christian priestess (Hotchkiss, 1996: 134)[10]; Saint Vasilissa (Figure 7), a 9-year-old who is generally associated with Bishop Anthimus and died a martyr for refusing to renounce her faith (Laflı, 2023a), and Saint Agothonicus, an influential Christian cleric (Laflı, 2023b) (Figure 9). All of these saints are believed to have been martyred in Nicomedia during the persecutions under Diocletian and Maximian, and many have remained an object of veneration for centuries to come. For example, Saint Panteleimon had at least four churches and monasteries in the region of Constantinople, where Saint Agathonicus's relics were also preserved (Gerstel, 2011: 176; Laflı, 2023b: 37).

3.2.3. Saint Eugenios of Trebizond

Saint Eugenios was also a martyr of the Diocletianic prosecutions, but he deserves specific mention as the patron saint of Trebizond. His name appears in various sources such as *the Miracles* by John Xiphilinos (c. 11th century), *the Encomium* by Constantine Loukites (c.14th century), and *the Logos* and *the Synopsis* by John Lazaropoulos (c. 14th century). The originals of these texts have survived and are preserved in a dossier in the second part of the Codex 154 of Dionysius Monastery, Mount Athos (Rosenqvist, 1996).

[10] Domna is often associated with another martyr, Indes, who was allegedly an imperial court eunuch. See Footnote 8 in this chapter.

Unfortunately, not much is known about Saint Eugenios. Whereas Symeon Metaphrastes associates him with the martyr Eustratios, other sources such as Loukites's *Enconium* and the *Synaxarion of Constantinople* describe him as the principal hero of another group of martyrs, consisting of Valerianus, Candidius, and Aquilas (Baldwin, Kazhdan, & Nelson, 1991 in Kazhdan, 1991: 742-3). Both sources suggest that Saint Eugenios was persecuted at Satala, where Lightfoot (1999) reports the discovery of a large basilica on a site previously thought to be an aqueduct that he suggests might be associated with St. Eugenios (274).

Saint Eugenios was prominently associated with Trapezuntine identity from the Roman era through the Byzantine Empire and the Kingdom of Trebizond. One of the major churches in Trebizond was dedicated to him, the local coins displayed his liking, and there existed a monastery in his name attracting pilgrims from across the empire (Rosenqvist, 1996). As is the case with other saints, our information about Saint Eugenios's life and deeds remains limited. Xiphilinos and Lazaropoulos's martyrologies offer some valuable details on the climate, history, politics, and everyday life of Trebizond and its vicinity, but little on Saint Eugenios specifically, while Loukites's Encomium is a typical panegyric (Rosenqvist, 1996: 151-157).

3.3. Council of Nicaea (AD 325)

An additional source of relevant information comes from the First Council of Nicaea. Convened by Emperor Constantine in AD 325, the Council marked a

pivotal moment in the history of early Christianity, bringing together bishops from across the Christian world to address various theological disputes and establish a uniform doctrine.

Participation in the Council is well-documented, which allows to draw inferences about the geography of Christianity at the time it took place (Gelzer, 1995). It is notable for our purposes that Paphlagonia and Pontus (Polemoniacus) had notably fewer bishops present compared to neighboring regions.

The attendants from the said regions are as follows:

Paphlagonia

1. Philadelphos of Pompeioupolis (Φιλάδελφος Πομπηιουπόλεως)
2. Petronios of Ionopolis (Πετρώνιος Ἰωνοπόλεως)
3. Euthymios of Amastris (Εὐθύμιος Ἀμαστρίδος)

Pontus Polemoniacus

1. Longinos of Neocaesarea (Λογγῖνος Νεοκαισαρείας)
2. Domos of Trapezous (Δόμος Τραπεζοῦντος)
3. Stratophilos of Pityous (Στρατόφιλος Πιτυοῦντος)

Even if we stretch our geographical definition to include the bishops Eusebius of Nicomedia, Cyril of Cius, and George of Prusias ad Hypium to the list, Bithynia and Pontus still remains underrepresented compared to other regions, which

raises potential questions about the extent of Christian establishment. Table 1 presents a regional comparison that highlights this disparity.

Table 1 Geographical Distribution of the Bishops at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325)

Provinces	Number of Attendants
Pontus Polemoniacus	3
Paphlagonia	3
Galatia	5
Asia	7
Lydia	9
Phrygia	8
Pisidia	11

The relative underrepresentation of Paphlagonia and Pontus, as indicated by the limited attendance of bishops from these regions, might suggest a smaller number of Christian congregations or a less developed ecclesiastical organization in these provinces. However, it is important to consider that secular factors such as population density, the size of the provinces, and the level of urban development could also have influenced this disparity. Reaching a conclusive answer to this question would require further investigation.

CHAPTER 4 MATERIAL EVIDENCE

Challenges abound in both the availability of material evidence and the interpretation of religious identity based on it, as previously outlined in Chapter 1 ("Conceptual Framework") and further expanded upon in Chapter 5 ("Conclusion and Limitations"). There is a limited corpus of archaeological evidence on pre-Constantinian Christianity. A crucial reason why is that distinctly Christian imagery, vocabulary, or spaces did not emerge until much later. Christianity also existed in a religiously pluralistic society, facing competition both inside and outside the religion. For the same reason, distinguishing it is a challenge. For example, as mentioned below, there are many inscriptions that carry hints of monotheistic belief, but cannot be reliably attributed to Christianity. Some number of these inscriptions must have belonged to Christians proper, but we simply cannot identify them.

It is apparent that the early believers strove to maintain an inconspicuous existence, whether in hiding or in plain sight. Hence, they congregated in house churches (*domus ecclesiae*) or public spaces. (Billings, 2011; Adams, 2013). This is not to say that the Christians were completely underground, as evidenced by the public announcement of Christian affiliation on gravestones in Ephesos and Phrygia, but, recall Pliny's anxiety to permit even the most basic forms of social organization such as fire brigades and benefit societies lest they turn political, we would remiss to ignore the precarity of Christianity's relationship with authorities until its adoption as official religion. These issues will be further

elaborated in the next chapter, but, in short, it is by definition a challenge to discover evidence of a community that actively strove to remain as inconspicuous as possible, not to mention the previously discussed difficulties about inferring religious identity on the basis of material remains and the hurdles arising from the dearth of archaeological research in the Southern Black Sea.

Asia Minor is actually home to some of Christianity's first known churches, the "Seven Churches of Asia" as they appear in the Bible (2 Rev.18–28). It must be noted that these were likely not the only churches that existed in Asia, but rather hubs in the communicative networks of early Christianity (Ramsay, 1904: 191–92, 196 as cited in Tabbernee, 2014: 283). We already know from Paul about the house church of Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus (2 Cor. 16:19; cf. Rom. 16:3–5) and his greeting of the Corinthians on behalf of "the churches of Asia," indicate that the Christians had already established several congregations across the region (Tabbernee, 2014: 273). Indeed, archaeological evidence confirms the Christian communities in at least four of the remaining six – Smyrna, Pergamum, Philadelphia, and Laodicea – as early as the end of the first century though remains of pre-Constantinian Christianity are yet to be found in Sardis and Thyatira (Tabbarnee, 2014: 273-287).

Christianity's presence in Bithynia and Pontus is significantly smaller by comparison. While earlier scholars have speculated that cities such as Sinope, Amisus, and Amastris hosted Christian congregations as early as the first

century, these claims largely rely on circumstantial evidence and remain historically contentious (e.g., Van der Meer et al., 1960). As a result, this chapter on material evidence covers far less ground than the preceding chapter on textual sources, primarily because the archaeological record offers limited insight into the early spread of Christianity in the Black Sea region until the fourth century. There are no known worship spaces from before Constantine, and, despite a richer corpus of epigraphic evidence, there are very few that can be identified as Christian with some degree of confidence, reflecting on a problem mentioned above. Given the limited amount of archaeological research in the Southern Black Sea, it would be misleading to interpret the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence. The material record remains far from complete and future excavations have potential for important findings. Unfortunately, research on this subject is currently limited by considerable gaps in both field research and interpretive scholarship.

The remainder of this chapter will proceed in two sections. The first will present a brief survey of epigraphic evidence on Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus in the pre-Constantinian era. The second will discuss structural remains of early Christianity in the same region, focusing on five specific sites: Nicomedia's Principal Church, Çiftlik Church and Balatlar Church in Sinope, Hisardere Basilica and Necropolis in Nicaea, and Kuşkayası Rock Relief near Amasra. Unfortunately, none of these sites meet the evidentiary standard our research ideally requires. Nicomedia's Principal Church is discussed in textual sources, but there is no archaeological evidence of it. Conversely, the remaining sites

have archaeological remains, but they are dated later than the pre-Constantinian era, which primarily concerns this thesis. Yet, they are currently the best available evidence in this regard, and therefore deserve mention in this context.

4.1. Epigraphic Evidence

Epigraphic evidence covers visual or lexical expressions of Christian faith or the presence of Christians as reflected by symbols or language found on inscriptions. Some of the challenges surrounding the interpretation of Christian epigraphy were previously discussed in Chapter 1, but it is helpful to revisit the subject in further detail before discussing the specific evidence of pre-Constantinian Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus.

As discussed earlier, the Christians coexisted with other pagan monotheists like Hypsistarians, who called their God the "Highest" (*hypsistos*) or "Almighty" (*pantokrator*) (Mitchell, 2016: 686). Generic markers of monotheistic belief such as "God-fearer" (φοβούμενοι) and "God-worshipper" (θεοσεβεῖς) were also commonly used but cannot be exclusively attributed to Christians. An authoritative source on this subject is the Inscriptiones Christianae Graecae (ICG), currently edited by Cilliers Breytenbach and Christiane Zimmermann. This project systematically compiles and organizes all known early Greek Christian inscriptions from Asia Minor and Greece, dating roughly between the second and sixth centuries AD. To date, the collection includes over 4,300

inscriptions. The ICG uses five criteria to decide whether an inscription can be considered Christian. These criteria are as follows (ICG, 2024):

1. Self-identification: Set up by or for someone who identifies as Christian (e.g. χρι/ηστιανός)
2. Symbolism: Easily recognisable Christian symbols like Greek/Latin crosses, Christograms, staurograms, nomina sacra, or signa such as ΙΧΘΥΣ or ΧΜΓ
3. Language: Specific Christian titles, offices or epithets (e.g., ἐπίσκοπος, πρεσβύτερος, διάκονος/διακόνισσα, δοῦλος/δούλη τοῦ Θεοῦ/Χριστοῦ), biblical citations or allusions, as well as words (e.g., κοιμητήριον, ἀνάστασις), formulae or acclamations (e.g., μνήμης +άριν for μ. χάριν, ζήσῃς ἐν θεῷ), maledictory formulae (e.g., πρὸς τὸν θεόν/ Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, δώσει λόγον τῷ θεῷ) that are typically used by Christians
4. Onomastics: Features names that are frequently (though not solely) attributed to Christians (e.g., Παῦλος, Κυριακός, Θέκλα, Κεφᾶς, Πέτρος, Ἀναστασία/ιος)
5. Location: Set up in a Christian building (e.g., votives, acclamations, or building dedications).

Evidently, this approach has its limitations, but it provides a practical framework for the task at hand.

As this thesis also reflects, material evidence for pre-Constantinian Christianity is meager despite the relative abundance of textual sources, and this corpus is

distributed unevenly among various Anatolian regions. Of the 275 entries in Destephen (2010)'s catalog of pre-Constantinian inscriptions from Asia Minor, 248 originate from the Inner Anatolia, particularly Phrygia and Lycaonia. Mitchell (2014) suggests that "the contrast with the epigraphic behavior of their Christian confrères from Phrygia and Lycaonia is complete and amazing" (281). Talloen (2019) similarly describes it "striking" and argues that it cannot be explained by the "mere coincidence of preservation" (496).

Phyrgian inscriptions were openly and distinctly Christian – they met many of the previously enumerated criteria such as including self-identification as *pistoi* ("the faithful"); featuring symbols like the cross, the Christogram, and the fish; naming Christian clergy, and using specific language (e.g., the Eumenian formula – "ἔσται αὐτῷ πρὸς τὸν Θεόν, δώσει λόγον τῷ Θεῷ") (Mitchell, 2014: 281). As Mitchell (2014) rightly observes, the geographical distribution reflected in Destephen (2010)'s catalog "cannot possibly provide an accurate picture of the distribution of Christian communities in Asia" (280). It is known from the sources such as the Bible (e.g., "seven churches of Asia") and Pliny's letters that early Christians existed in the western and northern coasts of Anatolia as well, but these regions only have 10 and 15 entries respectively. This suggests that "it did not seem appropriate to these Christians to identify themselves by their religious allegiance" whereas "'coming out' as Christian was normal in Phrygia" (Mitchell, 2014: 281).

Epigraphic catalogs, such as those by Johnson (1995) and Destephen (2010), document several examples of early Christian inscriptions. Appendix A includes original texts and English translations of early Christian inscriptions from Bithynia and Pontus identified in these works[11]. Some of these inscriptions can be confidently dated to the pre-Constantinian period. Among them is the previously mentioned Nicomedian epitaph featuring a cross subtly embedded within the text (No. 13 in Appendix A). Öhler (2018) dates this inscription to "no later than AD 111" (78), and Mitchell (1993) similarly identifies it as pre-Constantinian. However, Johnson (1995) argues that "a late fourth-century date is equally likely" (107). If Öhler's and Mitchell's dating is correct, this Nicomedian epitaph would represent the most compelling epigraphic evidence of pre-Constantinian Christianity.

While other inscriptions (e.g., Nos. 1, 15–17 in Appendix A) have also been proposed as pre-Constantinian (Mitchell 1993: 37–38), the majority of this corpus is generally considered post-Constantinian and thus beyond the scope of this research. In many cases, the proposed dating is speculative at best. For instance, an inscription from Claudiopolis (No. 1 in Appendix A) is described by Becker-Bertau (1986) as Christian due to the phrase "τοῖς ἁγιωτάτοις καὶ θεῷ πιστεύσασιν" (to the most holy and those who believe in God) and is further associated with the Diocletianic persecutions, with Becker-Bertau interpreting the phrase as indicative of martyrdom (54). However, this interpretation is

[11] The original texts and English translations are quoted directly from the cited sources and are not my own work.

tenuous and likely overstated. A brief overview of this epigraphic corpus, however, is nonetheless valuable to highlight the various elements that allow for their identification as Christian.

One characteristic element is the usage of Christian symbols like the cross (No. 4 and 8 in Appendix A) and the Christogram (No. 14 in Appendix A)[12]. We also know of a Pontic epitaph that is itself shaped like a cross (No. 16 in Appendix A) (see Figure 10). Specific words and phrases can also be illustrative. As previously mentioned, one such example is the Eumenian formula ("δώσει λόγον τῷ Θεῷ" - give account to God) (No. 3, 5, 6, 7 and 9 in Appendix A). Another is the word *koimeterion* (No. 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9 in Appendix A). Originating from the Greek koimao (κοιμάω, "to put to sleep") and translating as "sleeping chamber," this word echoes the Christian concept of death as a state of sleep which has various examples in the Bible such as Daniel 12:2 ("many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt") and John 11:11 ("[Jesus] went on to tell, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up'"). Another example is the motif of the Judgment Day (ΗΜΕΡΑ ΚΡΙΣ - hemera kris[eos]) (No. 3, 6, and 9 in Appendix A), though this motif is not exclusive to Christians and is also found in Jewish inscriptions (Johnson, 1995: 157). Onomastics has also been used as an identifying factor. For example, Anderson et al. (1910) identifies a Pontic epitaph (No. 15 in Appendix A) as Christian on the use of the name Sambatis (21).

[12] Johnson (1995) dates these inscriptions to mid-late-fifth century (107).

Though this name was also used by Jews, this epitaph also features a portrait of the deceased on the funerary stele, which Anderson et al. (1910) suggest is contrary to Jewish tradition, concluding that it must be Christian (21). Finally, the Pontic epitaph from Andrapa (No. 17) is also an interesting case in that it is identified as Christian by the word presbyter (πρεσβύτερον), which is interpreted as indicating a member of clergy (Anderson et al. 1910: 94).

Other motifs and elements have also been proposed as identifying Christianity, though these are less widely accepted. For example, Şahin (1979) suggests that the word parasporion (*παρασπόριον,* "small plot of land, garden") (No. 9 in Appendix A) can also be indicative, pointing out that planting seeds as a metaphor for resurrection is also found in Bible (i.e., 1 Corinthians 15:35–38 and John 12:24) (279-280). Johnson (1995), however, disputes this interpretation, arguing that it was used in the secular sense as a plot of land (75). Similarly, Mendel (1900) pointed out the use of the phrases "the one desired by all people" (ΤΟΝ ΠΑΣΙΝ ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΙΣ ΠΟΘΗΤΟΝ) and "having received the grace of God" (ΧΑΡΙΤ ΛΑΒΟΝΤΑ ΘΕΟΥ) in an epitaph from Claudiopolis (No. 2 in Appendix A), though, once again, such phrasing is possibly but not exclusively Christian (419).

At this stage, the challenges associated with this epigraphic corpus should be clear. There is currently no method for the dating of inscriptions solely through their physical qualities[13]. Consequently, scholars are forced to rely on the content

[13] Secondary elements such as lettering styles, carving techniques, and weathering patterns can be examined; however, these factors offer only limited and often imprecise information.

and context of the inscriptions, which, as previously demonstrated, often raises more questions than it answers. Not only is the dating of many inscriptions highly uncertain, but much of the evidence cited by earlier scholars is also based on tenuous interpretations, as illustrated by the examples discussed previously. When does an allusion to God or Judgment Day signify specifically Christian beliefs? Are terms such as *koimeterion* and *parasporion* truly Christian metaphors, or are they simply more poetic ways to describe a grave? Even if a certain name was more commonly used by Christians, how can it be definitively determined that a specific individual bearing that name was a Christian? These unresolved questions highlight the complexities and ambiguities inherent in interpreting this epigraphic corpus, underscoring the need for caution and nuanced analysis in drawing conclusions.

4.2. Structural Remains

4.2.1. Nicomedia's Principal Church

Nicomedia became the eastern imperial capital under Diocletian in AD 286 and remained so until Constantine moved the imperial seat to Byzantium (later, Constantinople) in AD 330. In this period, it was one of Christianity's most important centers, rivaling even Antioch in its influence (Texier, 1864: 50). After making Nicomedia the imperial campaign, Diocletian launched a large-scale urban development campaign. Lactantium describes the emperor as having an "endless passion for building" and an ambition "to equal Nicomedia

with the city Rome in magnificence" (Kyrtatas, 2020: 160). One of the newly erected buildings in Nicomedia was a Christian church, centrally located right across from the imperial palace (Kyrtatas, 161). As briefly mentioned in the section on Nicomedian martyrs, Christians enjoyed considerable influence in this period. Many notables including royals attended services, and several Christians held top positions in Diocletian's court, as evidenced by martyr Gorgonius and his companions. Eusebius and Lactantius (as cited in Kyrtatas, 2020: 163) even suggest that Diocletian's wife and daughter may have been sympathetic to Christianity and possibly converted to the faith.

The location of the principal church also underscores its social significance. In discussing the relatively tolerant period during the four decades preceding the Diocletianic persecution, Eusebius indeed notes that Christian congregations expanded rapidly, necessitating the construction of larger spaces to accommodate their gatherings. As Kyrtatas suggests, while Eusebius does not explicitly reference Nicomedia, it is plausible that his observations were at least partly informed by the city. This would place the construction of the church sometime between 260 and 303 CE (161). The Principal Church is believed to have been well-equipped, containing "utensils and furniture and a repository for the Holy Scripture" (Kyrtatas, 2020: 161). Its significance is further underscored by the attendance of many notable courtiers, including members of the families of Emperor Diocletian and co-emperor Galerius, who regularly participated in its services (161). Unfortunately, beyond these details, our knowledge of the building's earlier history remains scarce. The church was also the site where the

Diocletianic persecutions began. It was torn down on February 23rd 303, the day before the First Edict was issued (between AD 303-312/3) (G. E. M. de Ste., 1954: 75). Lactantius describes that, as soon as the edict was issued, "the prefect, along with the chief commanders, tribunes and officers of the treasury forced open the gates of the church and searched for images of the Divinity, and soon after, they burned the books of Holy Scriptures" (Kyrtatas, 2020: 166). Lactantius alleges that Galerius actually intended to burn the church down, but Diocletian objected, worrying that the fire would spread to city, and instead ordered the Praetorian Guards to "come in battle array with axes and other instruments to level the building to the ground" (Kyrtatas, 2020: 166).

Lactantius's account also features the previously mentioned anonymous martyr – identified in later martyrologies such as the Martyrologium Syriacum as Evethius of Nicomedia (see Mullen, 2004: 125) – who removed and tore up the edict posted at the church, and was later tortured and killed for his act of defiance: "When that edict had been posted up in a public place, a certain man, moved by God, and inflamed with zeal, tore it down, and shredded it to pieces, saying in scorn that the acts of the emperors were unjust and impious. This was done in no secret manner, but in the sight of many people. The man was seized and burned to death, bearing witness by his faith, through flames, to the truth of his words" (Lactantius, Chapter 1). The same story is similarly found in Book 8, Chapter 5 of Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History.

Unfortunately, archaeological remains of the principal church and the imperial residence in Nicomedia are yet to be found. Despite its historical importance, Nicomedia remained largely unexcavated until recently, as the ancient city lies beneath the modern town (Şare-Ağtürk, 2018: 414). This changed after monumental reliefs and architectural elements were found in an abandoned building in İzmit's Çukurbağ district, leading to the discovery of a terraced imperial cult complex. These findings prompted two rescue excavations in 2001 and 2009, which laid the foundation for the first systematic archaeological research on late antique Nicomedia (Şare-Ağtürk, 2018: 415–416). Recent topographical surveys (e.g., Çalık-Ross, 2007) highlight İzmit's significant potential for future archaeological research, which can deepen our understanding of both the Nicomedian church and pre-Constantinian Christianity more broadly.

4.2.2. The Çiftlik Church in Sinope

The Çiftlik Church is one of the two early Christian structural remains excavated in Sinope (see Figure 11). Archaeological research commenced in 1994 under Stephen Hill through a collaboration of Sinop Museum, the British Institute in Ankara (BIAA), and the University of Warwick (Hill, 1995a; Hill, 1995b; Hill, 1996; Hill, 1997; Hill, 1999; Hill, 2001). The remains at Çiftlik are a preservation challenge: lying at the mouth of a valley on the south of the peninsula on which the city of Sinop stands, the remains are located on silty soil that is eroding with coastal erosion (see Figure 12). Hill (1995) writes that "at least 1-5 metres of the

church has been eroded since 1990 [until 1995], and the low shelf in the water beside what survives has underwater remains from various Classical and Byzantine buildings," concluding that "conservation in situ of the remains at Çiftlik will not, unfortunately, be a practicable possibility" (219).

Hill (1995) suggests the Çiftlik church's architectural features are similar to others around the Southern Black Sea (e.g., Church D at Caricin Grad in Illyria) and distinct from its Anatolian neighbors (229) (see Figure 13). He also argues that the church was the center of an agricultural estate, not unlike the Panagia Church at Göreme in Cappadocia and St. Basil of Caesarea's estate at Annesi in the Pontus (Hill, 1995: 230). On this comparative basis, he dates the church to the late fourth or early fifth century, writing that they share "a number of features which suggest that they [Göreme and Çiftlik] were significant late Roman agricultural estates to which churches were appended in the period from the fourth to the fifth centuries" (230). This specific claim relies on a weak parallel between seemingly unrelated structures from different regions, making it appear speculative at best, but additional evidence such as the mosaic typology and the elements of Roman spolia suggests that the church should have been present by not much later than the first quarter of the 5th century at the latest (Hill, 1999: 292-294).

The Çiftlik Church's challenging location also raises interesting questions. During its construction, the church was affected by at least two separate landslides, as evidenced by the protective measures built to repair the damage

and prevent future hazards. After the first landslide, the southern precinct wall was refaced and the ground was leveled, raising the thresholds of the church and the northern perimeter building and blocking off the deeply buried doorways on the north and south sides of the church (Hill, 1999: 297-8). The precinct wall was then destroyed in a second landslide, which appears to have swept in from the south and caused the church to suddenly and instantly collapse northwards, causing severe damage that only the narthex survived (Hill, 1999: 298). Hill notes that this destruction had taken place before the carving of gallery capitals and moldings was completed, as evidenced by the remarkably preserved single-period mosaic flooring (see Figure 14) which lacks a courtyard pavement or path to the front door (298).

This stubborn insistence on constructing a church at such a challenging site suggests that the location may have held particular significance. In this context, it is worth noting that the Sinopean saint Phocas was also the patron saint of mariners, and later evidence shows the establishment of convents and shrines in his honor, stemming from a long-standing tradition linked to the Greek cult of the Dioscuri (e.g., Quirini-Poplawski, 2014: 106). If this were simply a seaside shrine, it could have been relocated elsewhere. However, if it held significance as a pilgrimage site, such as the place of Phocas's death or burial, this might explain why the Sinopitans insisted on continuing the construction. This theory, however, remains speculative and is yet to be supported by evidence.

4.2.3. The Balatlar Church in Sinope

The second early Christian structure in Sinope is the Balatlar Church (see Figures 15-16), whose excavation began in 1990 under Gülgün Köroğlu as a collaboration between the Sinop Museum and the Mimar Sinan Museum of Fine Arts. Initially constructed as a Roman bathhouse in the second to third centuries AD, the original structure's cross-shaped section was converted into a church in the fifth century (Köroğlu, 2018: 180) (see Figure 15). The conversion involved significant architectural modifications. The caldarium's eastern wall was removed for the construction of an apse while its central area was turned into a burial space with the drainage system repurposed into a crypt where sacrophagi and other burial artifacts indicating its use in the early Byzantine period were found (Öztürk-Hetto, 2023: 391-402). The frigidarium was similarly modified into a narthex-like space and utilized as a burial chamber. Votive inscriptions dated to the 6th-7th centuries AD were found here along with mosaic floors featuring geometric, floral, and animal motifs reflecting early Byzantine religious iconography (Öztürk, 2023: 57) (see Figure 16).

In line with the use of public spaces for Christian worship, Köroğlu (2023) hypothesized that the Sinopean Christians might have already been using the original bathhouse for their gathering before its eventual conversion into a church in the fifth century (Köroğlu in Köroğlu, İnanan, & Hetto 2023: 17). Köroğlu (2018: 181) had also suggested that a possible connection to Saint Phocas, underlining the discovery of white mussels and sea shells in the

cemetery yard which she points out were viewed by the Romans as symbols of rebirth and pilgrimage and associates them with the veneration of Saint Phocas. Unfortunately, neither of these theories are supported by current archaeological evidence, and our information on whether the Balatlar Church occupied any place in pre-Constantinian Christianity remains speculative.

Before concluding the discussion of the two Sinopean churches, it is necessary to also mention a third site that holds potential significance: the Roman-Byzantine settlement at Gerna on Sinop's western coast (see Doonan and Smart, 2011). The site was identified during the surveys conducted as part of Sinop Regional Archaeological Project (SRAP) with the discovery of a large fragment of a monolithic marble column that revealed a large brick-and-stone masonry structure underground. Doonan (2004) writes that "the marble column from the beach, the plan, orientation, monumental construction, and scale of the structure all suggest that [the structure] was a church" (109). On the basis of the banded brick masonry, it is thought that the structure is "roughly contemporary to the late Roman expansion along the south coast and the first phase of the Balatlar complex" (Doonan, 2004: 110). Though the ceramics found at the site are dated to the late Roman/early Byzantine period (4th-7th century), a 2nd-century altar bearing an inscription to Theos Hypsistos has also been found (Doonan, 2004: 110). Unfortunately, the Gerna site has suffered significant damage due to illegal excavation. However, these discoveries raise the intriguing possibility of a late-Roman temple being converted into a church, potentially the earliest of its kind discovered to date in the region.

4.2.4. The Hisardere Basilica and Necropolis in Nicaea

Located about three kilometers away from Iznik, the Hisardere Necropolis was discovered through illegal excavations in the early 1990s. This illicit activity had already revealed several sarcophagi and chamber-tombs (e.g., Eraslan and Altın, 2021; Ekin-Meriç and Dreyer, 2021; Ekin-Meriç and Kutbay, 2021). The first systematic excavations commenced at the site in 2019 under Aygün Ekin-Meriç as a collaboration between the İznik Museum and Dokuz Eylül University. Figure 17 presents a plan of the Hisardere Necropolis along with various finds from the site (Kaya et al., 2023: 128).

Archaeological evidence indicates that the necropolis was actively used between the second and fifth century (Ermiş, 2011: 122; Öz et al., 2023: 304). The necropolis is remarkable because it includes three early examples of Christian symbols. One example is a second-century Roman sarcophagus found at Bayırdibi, currently on display at the İznik Museum, featuring a cross carved inside the head section, which Ermiş (2011) suggests was retrofitted, indicating Christian reuse of Roman sarcophagi (122). Another example is a chamber tomb found at Katırcıini, featuring a christogram painted in red on the inner surface of its lid (Ermiş, 2011: 123-4) (see Figures 18 and 19). Ermiş (2011) points to another red-painted Christogram from the fourth century found in the catacombs of Milos and suggests, based on this parallel, that the example in question can also be dated to the same period. Lastly, another chamber tomb at

Plot No. 86 near Bayırdibi has two painted walls featuring birds and peacocks perched atop vines with grape bunches (Ermiş, 2011: 124, 136). This last example has yet to be dated, and while these motifs were later adopted as Christian symbols, they were also commonly used by pagans, such as the peacock, which was associated with Juno (see Ferguson, 1959: 23, 31-32).

The Hisardere complex also includes a three-nave basilica, described as "one of the largest of its kind" in Asia Minor, measuring 30 meters in width and 70 meters in length, including the apse and the atrium (Öz et al., 2023: 305). Although prior agricultural activity has caused significant damage to the floor mosaics, three panels have been recovered, two of which prominently display Christian symbols such as the cross and the heart (Öz et al., 2023: 308, 310). Notably, Öz et al. (2023) point out similarities between the mosaic patterns at Hisardere and those found at a fifth-century basilica in Derecik, also in Bithynia (Öz et al., 2023: 310; see also Çıtakoğlu, 2015). This parallel with Derecik as well as other structures at Xanthos and Misis-Mopsuestia support dating the basilica at Hisardere to sometime between mid-5th and mid-6th century (Öz et al. 2013: 312).

4.2.5. Kuşkayası Rock Relief

Though not a church like the previous examples, the Kuşkayası Rock Relief near Amasra is an interesting case that warrants mention in this context (see Wu, 2018). Located approximately four kilometers outside Amastris, along the

ancient road connecting Tieum and Sinop, the monument has suffered severe damage from local treasure hunters who destroyed its columns and pedestal with dynamite (see Figure 22). However, the relief figures remain intact, including a bilingual *tabula ansata* inscription dedicated to Emperor Claudius (Silvia, 2021:7) . This inscription identifies the monument as a gift from Gaius Julius Aquila, the governor of Bithynia and Pontus, enabling its dating to 45–49 CE (Silvia, 2021: 12). The relief is dedicated simultaneously to the imperial cult of Divus Augustus and the pagan cult of Theos Hypsistos Helios, which is found in a wide geography from Pergamum to Alexandria and associated with open-air sanctuaries and the worship of the sun (Wu, 2018: 73).

As Silvia (2021) observes, the head, hands, and feet of the relief appear to have been deliberately mutilated in earlier periods (19-21). This was a widespread practice by early Christians (see Pollini, 2013; Jacobs, 2018). Pollini (2013) suggests that such symbolic violence might have been "directly inspired by actual contemporary Christian judicial punishments [against idolatry]" (260). Another tradition involved carving crosses for purposes of exorcism, such as in temple deconsecrations, or as apotropaic symbols, for example, on foreheads or other body parts to serve as protective amulets (Jacobs, 2018: 279). Reflecting this tradition, there is also a cross carved into a column nearby (Wu, 2018: 73; Silvia, 2021: 21).

"Though there is some difficulty in dating this iconoclastic-type phase of destruction," writes Silvia (2021), "it is likely that the figures' mutilation was at

the hands of Christians in Late Antiquity, because that was when polytheism still acted as a major rival to Christianity" (22). If this is true, the Kuşkayası Rock Relief would represent a novel form of evidence for Christianity in the pre-Constantinian era, shedding light on early Christian interactions with and responses to paganism.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Bithynia and Pontus are listed among the places where Peter sent one of his first letters (English Standard Version Bible; 1 Peter 1:1). The earliest surviving evidence of Christianity in the Roman Empire comes from letters Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan during his governorship of this province (Pliny, 10.96). Yet, we have only so little information on Christianity's early history in this region, both in nominal numbers and relative to other regions.

This final chapter proceeds in two parts. First, it presents a brief overview of the available information on early Christianity in the Black Sea, specifically discussing what is known about "when" and "how" it spread. As attested earlier in this thesis, the answer to the question "*what do we know?*" is "*not a lot*," but the little that we do know nonetheless some analytical leverage that future research can build upon. Second, it concludes by why we know so little, focusing on three interrelated limitations: availability, visibility, and connectivity.

5.1. Findings

As meager as they are, textual sources and material remains do provide snapshots about the size and influence of Christians at certain points in history. Though they were discussed in greater detail in their respective chapters earlier in this thesis, it is helpful to revisit them within a unitary picture

and identify on their basis a chronology and basic trends about Christianity's spread in Bithynia and Pontus.

Table 2 below provides a listing of the dates and locations of Christian presence that can be found in the available sources discussed previously in this thesis.

Table 2 Timeline and Geography of Early Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus

Date	*Source*	*Location*
Mid 1st-century CE	Apostolic missions (dubitable)	Pontus
109-113	Pliny the Younger's letter to Trajan	Amisus (?)
111 TAQ	Inscription with cross symbol	Nicomedia
117	St. Phocas of Sinope's martyrdom	Sinope
130-140	Marcion of Sinope's excommunication	Sinope
ca. 150-160	Epistle on the martyrdom of Polycarp	Pontus
circa 161	Lucian's *The False Prophet*	Abonuteichos
166-175	Dionysios of Corinth's letters	Nicomedia and Amastris
240-270	Gregory of Neocaesarea's bishopric	Neocaesarea

250-251	Novatian schism	Bithynia and Pontus, broadly
303-313	Diocletianic persecutions (Eusebius, Lactantius, and hagiographies)	from Nicomedia to Trebizond
325	Council of Nicaea	Nicomedia, Claudiopolis, Hadrianopolis, Pompeiopolis, Ionopolis, Amastris, Neocaesarea, Trapezous and Pityous

The earliest point we can identify in this timeline is St.Andrew and St. Peter's apostolic missions to Bithynia and Pontus in the mid-first century. Unfortunately, the Bible provides no details on the timing and itinerary of these travels whose historical accuracy remains more than dubious.

Excluding these Biblical references, the earliest reliable datum is Pliny the Younger's letter to Trajan on Christians (10.96), which was previously discussed in Chapter 3. We can reliably estimate both the date of this letter and the place it was written. Though there are debates about the exact dates of Pliny the

Younger's tenure as governor (see Footnote 11), it was sometime between 109 and 113, which is quite a precise date in our context. Trajan's letters reflect the itinerary and timeline of his travels, which allows us to confidently assert that his letter on the Christians was most likely written in Amisus. In a letter written shortly before, Trajan mentions enclosing with his letter a petition from the people of Amisus (10.92). Though his next letter regards a proposed public works project in Amastris (10.98), a later letter discusses a legal case in Amisus (10.110), so it appears likely that Trajan was in Amisus in the period covering letters 10.92 to 10.110, which includes his letter on the Christians (10.97). Pliny's letter reveals, at the minimum, that, by the time of his governorship, Christians had reached enough visibility to attract attention and even impact the broader society such as depressing the market for sacrificial animals. Pliny also notes that some of the Christians he interrogated claimed to have abandoned the faith nearly twenty years earlier, potentially suggesting an even earlier presence of Christianity in the region. From this period, we also have the only identifiably Christian example of epigraphic evidence of pre-Constantinian Christianity: an inscription from Nicomedia dating to no later than 111 that has a cross symbol hidden into its text. Other epigraphic evidence is from around or after Constantine.

Nearly a decade after Pliny's letter, still during Trajan's reign, Saint Phocas was martyred in Sinope around 117. Shortly thereafter, Marcion of Sinope emerged as a significant figure in early Christianity. Marcion's father was reportedly the bishop of Sinope, and after being excommunicated by his father sometime

between the 130s and 140s, he traveled to Rome (Frend 1984: 212-17). If this account is accurate, it suggests that Sinope's Christian community had grown by the first half of the second century to a level warranting its own bishop. Admittedly, the circumstances of Saint Phocas's martyrdom are murky, sometimes dated to the reign of Diocletian instead, while Marcion's association with Sinope only begins to appear with Epiphanius, which could be apocryphal, as discussed earlier. Granted these sources are accurate, however, this data expands Christianity's geography further to the east.

Then comes Lucian's *Alexander or The False Prophet*. Lucian recounts that Alexander lambasted his detractors as "atheists and Christians," while also speaking of other pagan rivals, which indicates that Christianity was present in and around Abonuteichos at this time, but still seemingly a minority sect. Abunuteichos falls within the space, bounded by first Amisus and then Sinope in the east, that we already assumed Christianity to have been present, but Lucian presents another piece of positive evidence for this claim as well as a qualitative indication of its extent. We can also reliably date this instance: Lucian claims to have visited Abonuteichos to personally challenge Alexander, which Flinterman (1997) dates to late summer of 161 as terminus post quem (282). From around the same time, we also have Eusebius's passing mention of an alleged letter from the church of Smyrna to the "churches of Pontus" about the martyrdom of its leader, Polycarp, which, granted that it is true, would be additional evidence for Christianity in Pontus (*Ecclesiastical History*, 4.15). Dionysios of Corinth's letters to Nicomedia and Amastris are also dated within less than a decade of

Lucian to between 166 and 175. Though it is safe to assume that Christianity was already present in Nicomedia and Amastris due to the former's size and stature and the latter's appearance in Pliny's correspondence, these letters confirm that these cities had at this point in history sufficiently organized congregations well-integrated into the broader networks of Christianity and influential enough to attract a letter from Dionysios.

A later source is Gregory of Neocaesarea's *Epistola Canonica*. Gregory, who served as Neocaesarea's bishop from around 240 to 270, is credited with transforming a small congregation of only seventeen Christians into a community where only seventeen pagans reportedly remained by the end of his tenure (Mitchell, 1999: 53). Though this account is likely a posthumous embellishment, it highlights the spread of Christianity to the Pontic hinterland during this period. Indeed, the rest of Gregory's epistle provides further evidence of a nascent church in the early stages of organizing. Also around the same time, the Novatian schism emerged, driven by a theological debate over whether those who had renounced their faith during the Decian persecutions (ca. 250-251) could be readmitted into communion. The schism gained considerable influence in Bithynia and Pontus, though, unfortunately, our knowledge about it remains limited.

About a half-century later comes the Diocletianic persecutions in 303 to 313, our knowledge of which comes mostly from Eusebius and Lactantius, along with the life-stories of certain saints and martyrs. These sources present several data

points that contribute valuable information. One is that Christianity's size and standing had grown significantly, as reflected in the presence of a church right across from the imperial residence in Nicomedia, many notables including royals attending services, and several Christians such as the martyr Gorgonius and his companions holding top positions in Diocletian's court. Another is Christianity's presence further eastward, as evidenced by the martyrdom of St. Eugenios in Trebizond.

The persecutions conclude with a dramatic reversal of fortunes: Constantine's conversion in 313 and Christianity's subsequent transformation from a minority sect to a state-sponsored religion. The Council of Nicaea nearly a decade later in 325 provides a portrait of Christianity as it existed at that time, showing a religion that spanned the entire Bithynia and Pontus with bishops present from Nicomedia in the west to Trapezous in the east and even beyond to Pityous in modern-day Georgia. As discussed earlier in Chapter 3, the Council was sparsely attended from Bithynia and Pontus, which possibly indicates Christianity remained relatively underdeveloped in this region, though it must be cautioned that other factors such as population levels, province size, and the urban development are also likely to play a role.

The chronology described above also suggests a diffusion pattern, providing insights into the 'how' of Christianity's spread. While this claim is preliminary and based on limited evidence, the outlined narrative supports the theory that Christianity initially spread eastward through coastal cities before moving into

inland areas, aligning with Stark's (1996) hypothesis that 'port cities tended to be Christianized sooner than inland cities' (76). Stark similarly argued that "Hellenic cities had Christian congregations sooner than Roman cities" (79)," but evidence does not consistently support this; for instance, the Mithridatic ex-capital Amaseia, despite its community of Greek courtiers and strong Hellenic influence, does not appear in our timeline. Available evidence indicates that authorities generally lagged behind rather than facilitated Christianity's spread. Moreover, the prevalence of heterodox movements such as Marcionism in the second century and Novatianism in the third century suggests that Christianity's spread in Bithynia and Pontus may better fit a bottom-up model.

In this context, the region's unique geographical features and their impact on both internal and external connectivity may also be significant. As discussed below, the peripheral location of Bithynia and Pontus affected its connectivity with the rest of the empire, limiting the reach and influence of imperial authority. Furthermore, the challenging terrain, especially further east, meant that traveling from the coast to inland areas often required more time and expense than reaching locations that were nominally much farther away. These relative isolations might have had a sui generis effect that limited top-down pressures and opened up space for bottom-up processes in how Christianity was received, spread, and practiced.

While discussing the absence of structural remains and representative imagery, it is important to underline that a spatial organization and visual vocabulary

developed and standardized much later than the period studied. Churches in the traditional sense did not exist prior to Constantine. Earlier Christian worship-spaces that we know are “house churches” like those in Dura-Europos, Aqaba, and Megiddo. Christian iconography such as the Ichthys, Chi-Rho, Alpha-and-Omega were either used sparingly and secretly like in the Catacombs of Rome or developed much later. These issues will be revisited below in the context of visibility as a limitation.

5.2. Limitations

As mentioned earlier, the dearth of archaeological research on the Southern Black Sea was previously discussed by Erciyas (2006) and Özgüner (2015). Özgüner (2015)’s survey of Turkish archaeological research ended in 2011. For my research, I extended it to the present, which revealed that only 6 percent (57 out of 921) of all survey reports and less than a half-percent of all excavation reports (81 out of 1448) published in this period are from research conducted in the Black Sea. Indeed, several provinces in the Black Sea have never received a research permit, whereas Mediterranean hotspots such as Antalya, İzmir, and Muğla each receive up to thirty of them every year (Özgüner, 2015: 334). It should also be reminded that these numbers cover the entirety of archaeological research from prehistory to the Islamic era. As Erciyas (2005) observes, previous research in this region has primarily focused on two competing schools: Turkey’s nationalist archaeologists focused on the Kaskans and Hittites while Europe’s classical archaeologists limited their attention to the Greek colonies on the

coastline, reflecting their respective ideological motivations (183). Therefore, the period that concerns this thesis – late antique and Byzantine eras – are even less represented in this already limited corpus.

Indeed, looking at these numbers, it would not be an overstatement to describe the Black Sea as not even "understudied" but rather "practically unstudied." Obviously, the less studies there are in a region, the fewer remains we would find and the less we would know about it. As Erciyas (2005: 183) also implies, this lack of scholarly attention may also deter many scholars, who could view it as a signal that dedicating their efforts and resources here carries high risks with limited potential for reward, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of scholarly neglect. Had the Southern Black Sea received as much attention and resources, one might argue, it possibly could reveal just as much and perhaps even more as that of other regions in the Asia Minor. In this sense, what is lacking may be not the material evidence but the attention and resources required to recover it.

Özgüner (2015) has also cited political sensitivities, economic rationales, and natural features as additional explanations. Pointing that Southeastern Anatolia is also similarly understudied, she argued that the authorities have systematically discouraged archaeological scholarship in these regions due to political sensitivities about the legacies of Kurds in the Southeastern Anatolia and Greeks in the Black Sea and their relevance to contemporary conflicts

(Özgüner, 2015: 150)[14]. Furthermore, governments have traditionally viewed cultural heritage as a source of tourism revenue and allocated their attention and resources. Consequently, monumental sites in the Turkish Riviera's tourist destinations have received disproportionate support (Özgüner, 2015: 132).

The region has also presented scholars with practical challenges such as dense vegetation, heavy precipitation, mountainous terrain, and the prevalence of wooden architecture (Çilingiroğlu, 1987; Çilingiroğlu and Derin, 1995; Karauğuz, 2006; as cited in Özgüner, 2015: 147). The open question, however, is whether such factors can qualifiably explain the Black Sea's dearth of evidence compared to other regions. For example, timber is indeed widely available in the region, and, if it accounted for a sizable portion of the vernacular architecture, which it plausibly did though this claim too would have to be empirically affirmed, then it might provide an explanation the relative dearth of evidence, since timber structures would be more prone to decay, but only if it is not contradicted by another region where timber was as prevalently used but the available evidence is much richer nonetheless.

[14] These are not concerns from a distant past. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Islamic-conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) have been actively mobilizing cultural heritage towards political ends (van Paepeghem, 2022). In addition to an aggressive campaign for repatriation from foreign collections, creation of more UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and new or upgraded museum facilities, this campaign has also involved greater support for the study of Seljukid and Islamic heritage, pressure against foreign archaeological institutes, and controversial actions such as the destruction of Hasankeyf and the reconsecration of church-turned-museums as happened to the 13th-century church of Hagia Sophia in Trabzon (Aykaç, 2018).

It must be strongly emphasized that future research holds great potential for significant discoveries. A particularly noteworthy example is the previously discussed Roman-Byzantine settlement at Gerna on Sinop's western coast (see Doonan & Smart, 2011). If the site is confirmed to be a late-Roman temple-turned-church, as current evidence suggests, and future investigations yield sufficient material for contextualization and precise dating—despite the extensive damage caused by past illegal excavations—this could represent the earliest known church in the region. Such a discovery would offer invaluable insights into the early spread and establishment of Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus.

A second factor to consider is visibility, not in the academic sense of what is in/visible in the material record, which we already discussed above, but rather in the literal sense of who could see what, where, and how? James C. Scott (1998) describes the premodern states as "partially blind" in many respects because "it knew precious little about its subjects, their wealth, their landholdings and yields, their location, their very identity; lacked anything like a detailed 'map' of its terrain and its people" (2). Thus, the central problem of statecraft was to achieve the ability to "see" and "read" the populace – "legibility," as Scott calls it – so that the state can tax, conscript, and control it (Scott, 1998: 2).

The more a state could see and read about its populace, the greater its power over them. Conversely, the less visible and legible a populace makes itself to the state, the more power it gains to resist its control. Emily Dale (2019)'s concept of

“anopticism,” which she develops as an antithesis to Michel Foucault (1975)’s “panopticism” (206–213), captures this duality of visibility and power. Whereas panopticism indicates “the exercise of power, or the organization of power through the built environment, by enhancing or increasing the visibility, or the illusion of visibility, of certain groups,” anopticism is the “ability or power to make individuals or groups invisible. (Dale, 2019: 598). Dale (2019) argues that anoptic power allows non-elites to hide themselves from the panoptic gaze of the surveillance strategies elites use to watch and discipline their subjects (602). In this sense, actions and assemblies conducted out of sight are themselves an exercise of power by those who organize them.

Prior to Constantine's conversion, Christianity was a marginalized sect, whose survival depended on its ability to avoid attention from authorities when it could and evade their power when it must. As Turner (1979) writes, the Christians had “every incentive to maintain an inconspicuous existence” (158). Hence, there was a premium on the ability to control visibility. Adams (2013) extensively documents the various spaces, beyond houses, where early Christians congregated—such as tabernae (137-8), barns (146-7), warehouses (149-50), hotels and inns (157-9), bathhouses (171-3), gardens (181-3), watersides (186-8), and burial sites (192-4). The common thread linking these diverse spaces is the privacy they afforded to their occupants.

The corollary of this logic is that the more successful the Christians were in concealing themselves, the less likely their traces are to survive in the

archaeological record. As stated earlier, Christianity did not develop its own imagery, vocabulary, and spaces until much later anyhow. The incentive to remain inconspicuous must have also minimized material remains; using everyday objects for sacred purposes as opposed to specialized religious artifacts, and avoiding using overtly religious symbols in what little they left behind, lest they be discovered by the authorities. Moreover, artifacts that tend to survive are those made from durable materials such as stone, metals, pottery, and glass—materials that would be costly if rare and generic if common. It must be remembered that one instance we know of Christians enjoying considerable visibility in the pre-Constantinian period is right before the Diocletianic persecution with a church standing directly across from the imperial residence in Nicomedia, many elites attending services, and several having converted to Christianity.

Thirdly, availability and visibility are also integrally related to connectivity. Owen Doonan (2024) describes Bithynia and Pontus as a “periphery within” the Roman Empire. It presented a formidable governance challenge to the consolidation of Roman rule due to its fractious politics, mutinous tribes, and unforgiving geography. The topography is especially challenging, with the Pontic Mountains stretching along the coastline like a stone wall, rising more than two thousand meters high and extending over one thousand kilometers, separating the shore from its hinterland.

As Scott (2009) captures with his concept of "friction of terrain" (43), the cost and ease of travel varies according to geographical resistance. Seas and rivers offer routes of least friction while travel through mountainous terrain is considerably slower (Scott, 2009: 45). The friction of terrain is especially salient in the case of Bithynia and Pontus, because, although the administrative unit covered both the coasts and the inland, traveling between the two was actually more costlier in terms of both time and expense than reaching distant shores.

Using the Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World (ORBIS), it is possible to estimate the duration and cost of travel in antiquity including seasonal variation and modes of transport. Table 3 below presents estimated travel costs between and from some population centers in Bithynia and Pontus and the rest of the Roman Empire.

Table 3 Estimated Travel Times Between Major Cities in the Ancient World using ORBIS Data

Travel time (days/km) (cheapest)	Claudiopolis	Flaviopolis	Amaseia	Nicopolis
Heraclea Pontica	2.3 / 65 km	3.9 / 117 km	7.8 / 654 km	15.1 / 1128 km
Sinope	4.5 / 437 km	6.3 / 489 km	5.1 / 282 km	12.3 / 756 km

Trapezus	7.9 / 931 km	9.6 / 983 km	6.1 / 436 km	8.7 / 262 km
Claudiopolis		1.7 / 51 km	10 / 720 km	17.3 / 1194 km

Before concluding, though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore further, it would be remiss not to observe how the dynamics described above resonate with Fernand Braudel's broader thinking on the Mediterranean, especially his concept of "almost islands" (presque-îles), isolated landscapes such as peninsulas, oases, and mountains that can be functionally understood as "islands that the sea does not surround" (1966: 160-1).

In conclusion, the survey compiled and presented herein offers not only a substantive overview of the material record as it currently stands but also underscores the urgent need for more extensive and comprehensive excavations. A considerable gap remains between our present knowledge and the depth of understanding necessary to fully address the questions surrounding the history of Christianity in Bithynia and Pontus during the pre-Constantinian era. This thesis represents a modest step toward laying the groundwork and identifying possible pathways for future research. Regardless of the ultimate answers to the questions we aim to resolve, the essential first step toward advancing our understanding is to devote greater attention and resources to the study of the history and archaeology of the Southern Black Sea region, particularly its pre-

Islamic heritage, which has been woefully overlooked and remains largely unexplored.

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FIGURES

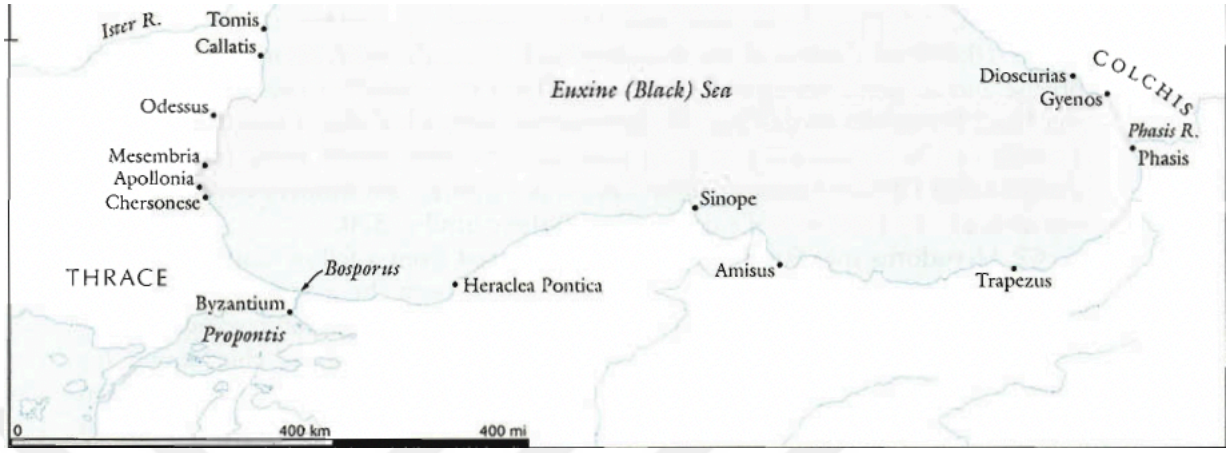

Figure 1 Map of Black Sea cities in Herodotus's Histories (Herodotus c. 430 BC/2019: 150).

Figure 2 Modern Cities in Xenophon's Anabasis

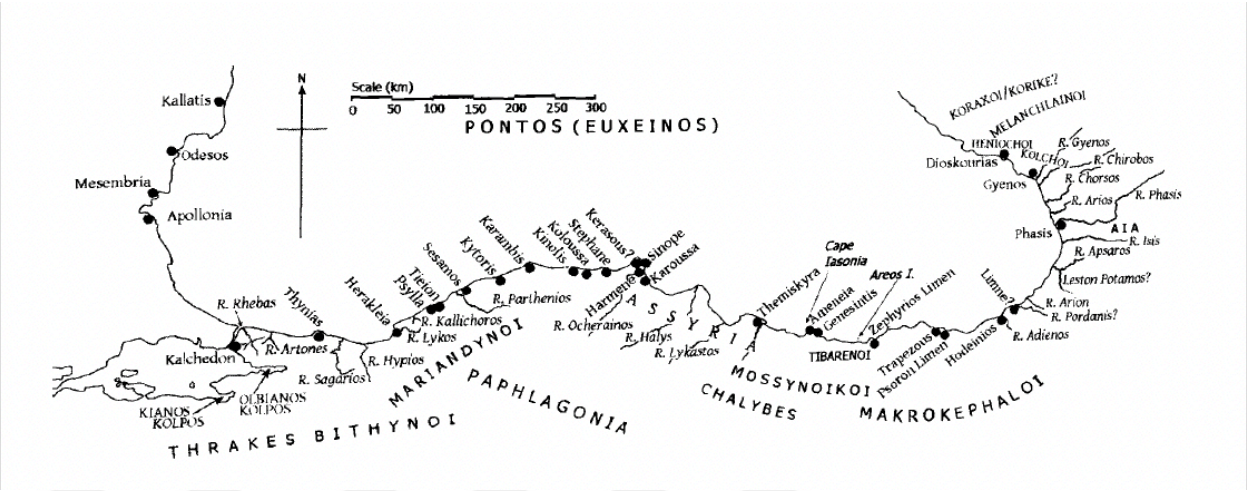

Figure 3 The Black Sea as described in Pseudo-Skylax's Periplus (Shipley, 2011: 151).

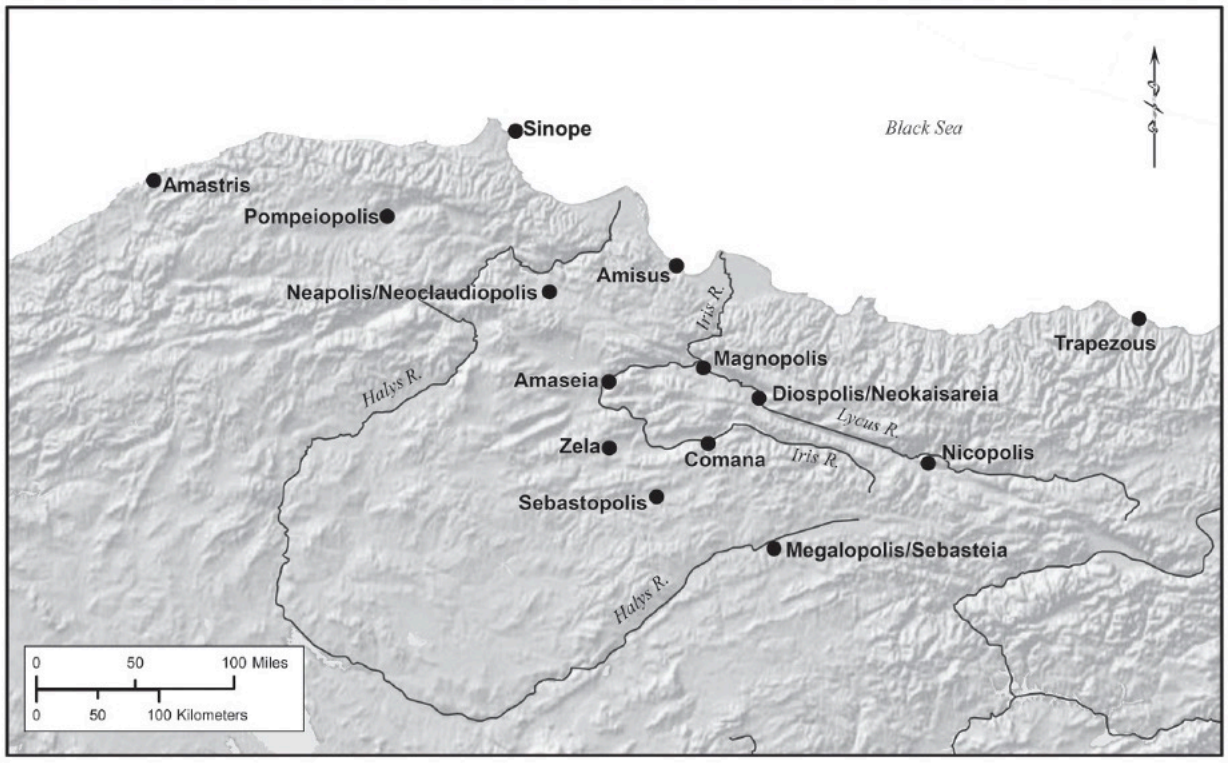

Figure 4 Pompeian Foundations in Roman Pontus, Map from Madsen, J. M. (2020). From Trophy Towns to City-States: Urban Civilization and Cultural Identities in Roman Pontus (54). Oxford University Press.

Figure 5 Clay pilgrim token of Saint Phocas. (1982). Image from G. Vikan, Byzantine pilgrimage art (p. 13). Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University. Hermitage Museum collection.

Figure 6 Vasilissa of Nicomedia, as depicted in the Menologion of Basil II. (Lafli, 2023: 36).

Figure 7 St. Agathonichus depicted in a 14th-century mural painting in the northern choir of the Visoki Dečani Monastery, Kosovo. (Laflı, 2023:38).

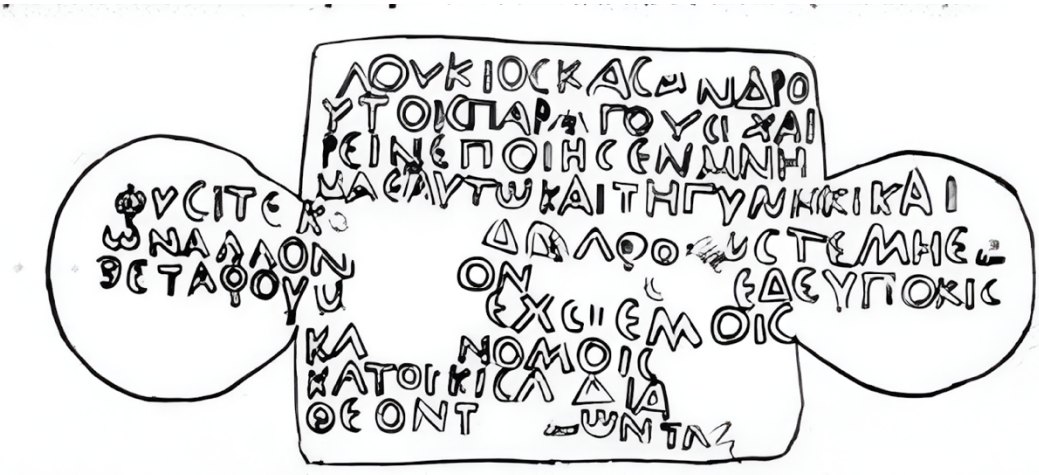

Figure 8 Cross-Shaped Inscription: Amisos (Themiscyra / Çarşamba): No. 273 in Destephen; No. 15 in Anderson et al. (1910): 26-7.

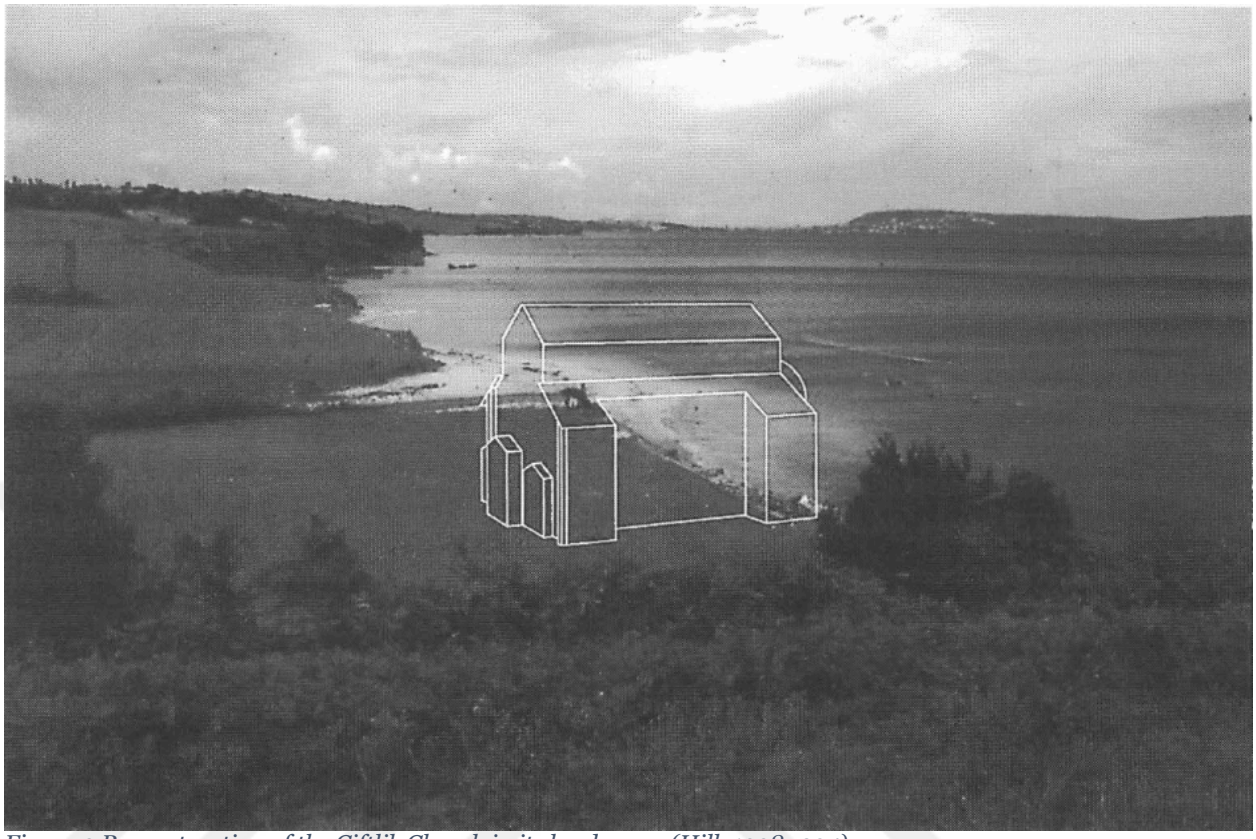

Figure 9 Reconstruction of the Çiftlik Church in its landscape. (Hill, 1998: 294).

Figure 10 Çiftlik Church Site View. From the Archive of Sinop Archaeology Museum https://www.kulturportali.gov.tr/medya/fotograf/fotodetay/2224.

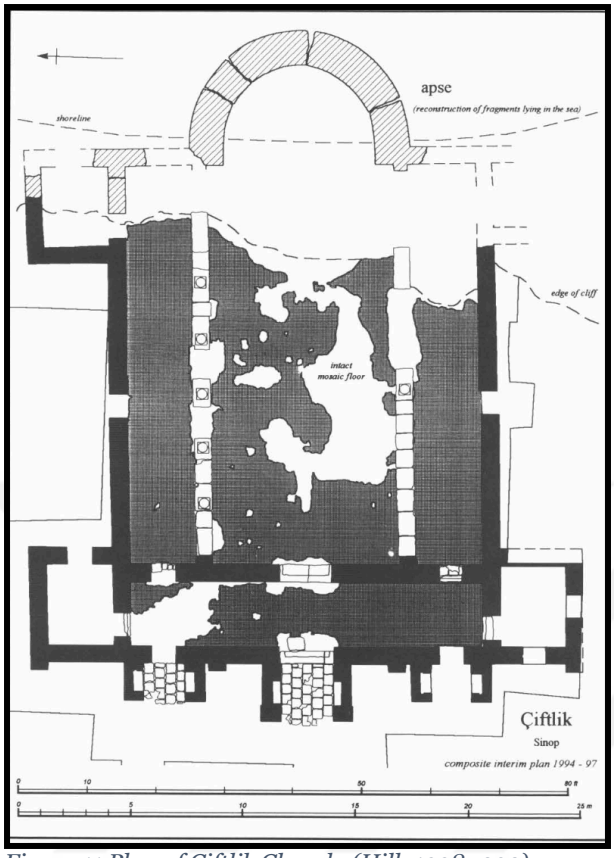

Figure 11 Plan of Çiftlik Church, (Hill, 1998: 293).

Figure 12 Section of mosaic in the nave of Çiftlik Church, (Hill, 1998: 288).

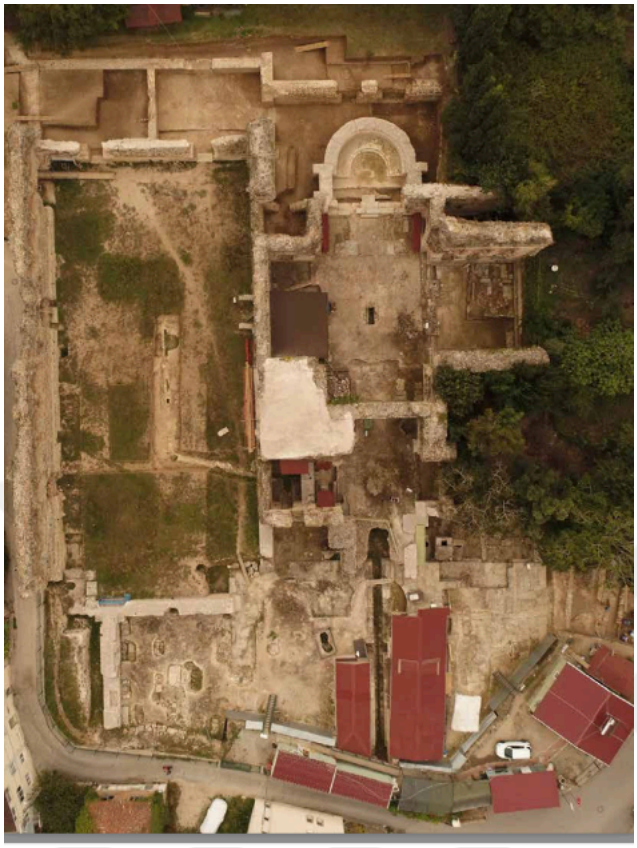

Figure 13Balatlar Church Aerial Photograph (Hetto, 2021: 83).

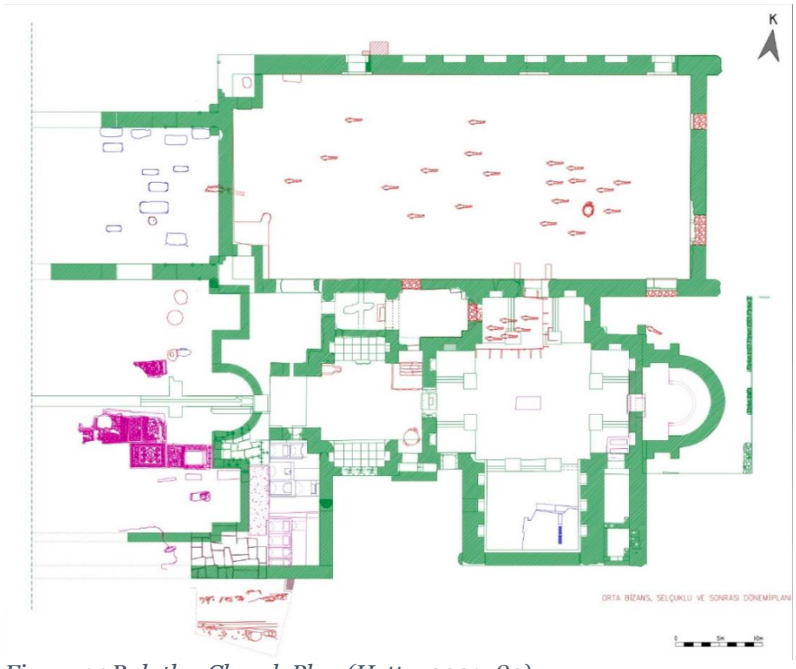

Figure 14 Balatlar Church Plan (Hetto, 2021: 83).

Figure 15 Balatlar Church Room. (Köroğlu, 2018: 184).

Figure 16 Balatlar Church Mosaic Floor, (Köroğlu, 2023: 73).

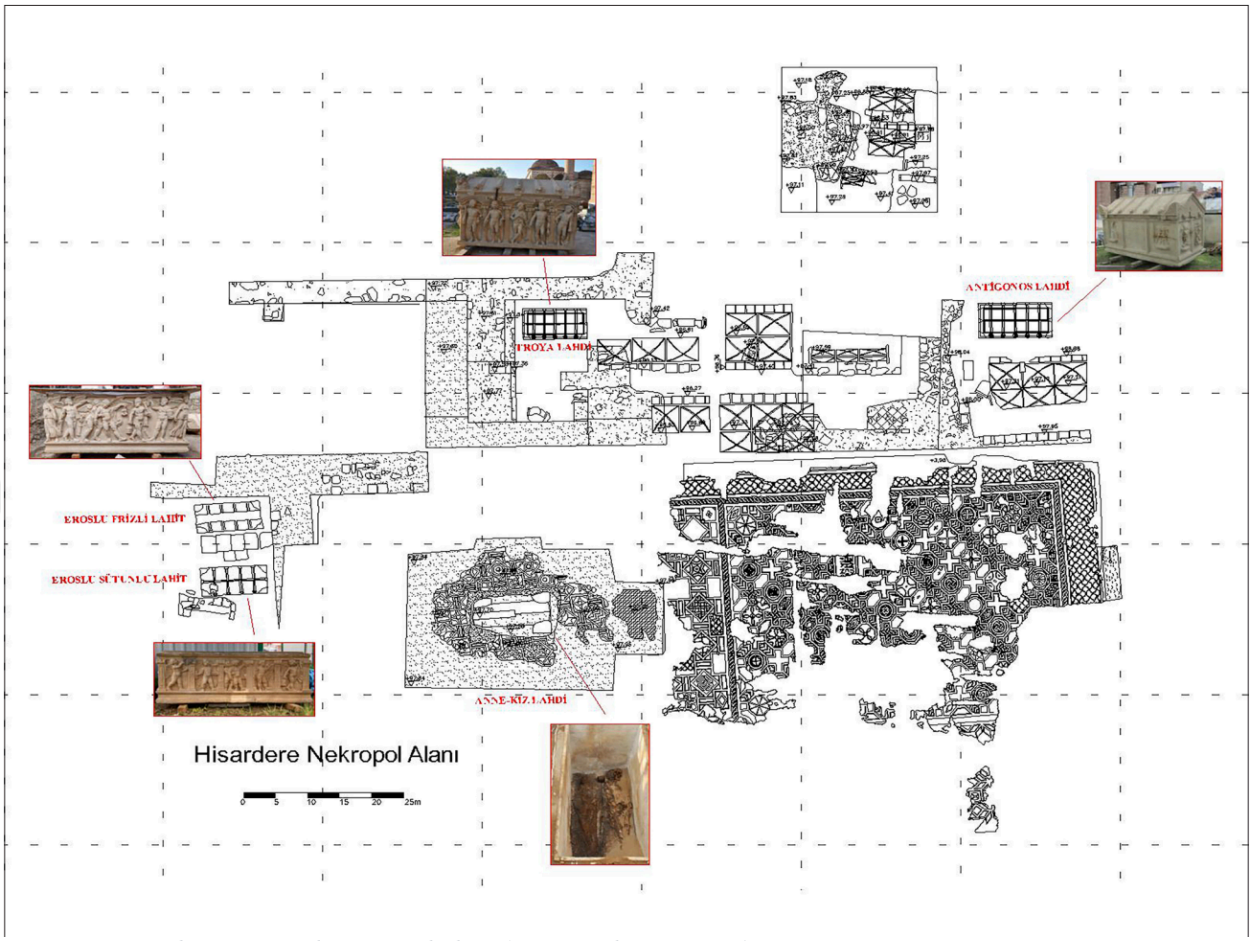

Figure 17 Hisardere Necropolis-General Plan. (Kaya et al.. 2013: 128).

Figure 18 Chi-Rho (christogram) on the interior surface of the lid covering the sarcophagus-style burial chamber at Katırcıini Mevkii Image from İznik Museum Archive, Ermiş, (2011): 138).

Figure 19 Red-colored strip decoration inside the burial chamber at Katırcıini, (Ermiş, 2011: 139).

APPENDIX A

Epigraphic Evidence (Original Text and English Translation) †

The list below Destephen (2010)'s catalog with one addition (No. 14) from Johnson (1995). The translations are furnished from the sources alongside each entry.

1 - Claudioupolis (Bolu): Destephen, No. 260; No. 44 in Becker-Bertau (1986): 53-4

Τοῖς ἁγιωτάτοις καὶ θεῷ πιστεύσασιν Μαρ. [Αθ.] Δημητριανῷ τῷ ἀ' Ἀρεσάν- τῳ καὶ πάντα πολιτεύσα- μένῳ, ἀγωνοθετήσαντι δὲ ἐπιτελῶς, καὶ τῇ γλυκυτάτῃ μητρὶ Αὐρ(ηλίᾳ) Παννυχίδι Αὐρ(ηλίᾳ) Δημητριανῇ θυγατρ(ὶ) αὐτοῦ [κ]αὶ ὁ γαμβρὸς Δομ(ίτιος) Ἡλιόδωρος ἅμα καὶ τῷ ἀδελφῷ Δημητριανῷ ἅμα καὶ τῷ θεῖῳ Χρυσίππῳ ἔστησαν τόδε σῆμα μνήμης χάριν (Θεοῦ ἀνοσίων)	To the most holy ones and to God who has been believed in, Mar. [Ath.] Demetrianos the First, who was devoted to Ares and lived an exemplary life, and who also served as an agonothete with excellence, and to his dearest mother Aurelia Pannychis, Aurelia Demetrianē, his daughter, and [also] the son-in-law, Domitius Heliodoros, together with his brother Demetrianos, and also his uncle Chrysippos, they erected this stele in memory of the [pious] God.

2- Claudioupolis (Sarıcalar): Destephen, No. 261; No. 121 in Mendel (1900): 419

Τὸν πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ποθητόν καὶ νέον ἐπίτιμον χάριτ[ας]... λαβόντα θεοῦ κατε... σεμνῶς βιώσας μετὰ... [καὶ] πάσης στοργῆς μνημο[σύνης] ἕνεκεν, στῆσα τόδε [σῆμα] σὺν φίλοις τέκνοις.	To the one beloved by all people, young and honorable, receiving grace from God... having lived with dignity and with all devotion... [and] for the sake of all love and remembrance, this monument was erected along with friends and children

3- Nicaea (İznik): Destephen. No. 262; No. 556 in Şahin (1979); 4.17 in Johnson (1995): 151

Αὐρηλία Χρήστη Πωλίωνος Αὐρηλίῳ Ἀττικῷ καὶ Αὐρηλίᾳ Τροφίμᾳ καὶ ἐμαυτῇ τὸ μνημεῖον κατεσκευ- ασα, ἐπὶ τῷ μετὰ τὸ κα- τατεθῆναι ἡμᾶς ἀμοφο- τέρους εἶναι αὐτὸ ἄ- συλον, εἰ μὴ τέκνον ἡμῶν τι πάθῃ· εἰ δέ τις ἕτερος σκυλῇ, δώσει λό- γον τῷ θεῷ ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρί[σεως].	I, Aurelia Chreste, daughter of Polion, constructed this monument for Aurelios Attikos, Aurelia Trophimia, and myself, on the condition that after we are interred together it is to be inviolable unless a child of ours should die. If any other should violate it, he will give account to God on Judgment Day

4 - Nicaea (İznik): Destephen. No. 263; No. 578 in Şahin (1979)

- - - Ἰούλιος Ὑ- κων ἐν φυλῇ Σεβαστῇ κα- τεσκεύασα τ- ὸ κοιμητήρι- ον ἐμαυτῷ κα- ὶ τῇ γλυκυτά- τῃ μου συνβ(ίῳ) Κυριτίᾳ καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις. Χαῖρε παρο- δῖτα †	Julius Hy[kon], of the Sebaste phyle, constructed this koimeterion for myself and my sweetest companion, Kyrittia, and our children. Farewell, O traveler †

5 - Nicaea (İznik): Destephen. No. 264; No. 557 in Şahin (1979); 3.10 in Johnson (1995): 101

Φλ. Ἰταλᾶς ἀπὸ προ- νητόρων κατεσκεύ- ασα τὸ κοιμητήριον ἐμαυτῷ καὶ τῇ σεμνοτάτῃ μου συμ- βίῳ μου Αὐρηλίᾳ Ῥωμύλῃ	I, Flaouios ltalas, of the protectores, constructed this koimeterion for myself, my most revered wife, Aurelia Romula, my son, Aurelios Romulos,

καὶ τῷ υἱῷ μου Αὐρηλίῳ Ῥωμύλ[ῳ] καὶ τῇ μηδεστρᾷ μου Αὐρηλίᾳ Ὀδρήν καὶ τῷ γυναικαδέλφῳ μου Αὐρ. Σενεκιανῷ ἐπὶ τῷ μετὰ τὸ κατατεθῆναι ἡμᾶς ἀμφοτέρους τίς ἂν σκυλῇ τὸ κοιμητήριον, δώσει λόγον Θεῷ.	my mother-in-law, Aurelia Oursa, and for my brother-in-law, Aurelios Senekianos, on the condition that after we are interred together, whoever should violate the koimeterion will give account to God.

6 - Nicaea (İznik): Destephen. No. 265; No. 552 in Şahin (1979)

- - - [κατεσκεύασεν ἑαυτῷ] [καὶ τῇ γυναικὶ] τὸ κημ- τήριον καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις· εἰ τις δὲ ἕτε- ρος σκυλῇ τὸ κοιμητήριον, δώ- σει λόγον θεῷ ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρί- σεως. Χαῖρε- τε παροδῖται	--- [Constructed for himself] [and for his wife] the koimeterion and for their children. If anyone else violates the koimeterion, they will give account to God on Judgment Day. Farewell, O travelers.

7 - Nicaea (İznik): Destephen. No. 266; No. 573 in Şahin (1979)

ΕΚ [ἐμαυ[τῷ καὶ τῇ γυ]- ναικὶ· ἐ[ὰν τις δ]- ὲ σκυλῇ, δ[ώσει λόγ]- ον θεῷ [ἐν ἐκε]- νῃ τῇ ἡ[μέρᾳ καὶ] δώσει τ[ῷ ταμίῳ] * μύ(ρια) β’ Τερ[...] ἀρχοντο[ςκησω]	[I built this tomb for myself [and my wife]. If anyone violates (the tomb), on the appointed day, they will give an account to God and pay a fine of 2,000 denarii to the treasury;

8 - Nicaea (İznik): Destephen. No. 267; No. 553 in Şahin (1979); 3.15 in Johnson (1995): 107

† Αὐρήλιος Χρήσ- τος οἰκῶν ἐν τετραπύλῳ, λι-	† I, Aurelios Chrestos, living in Four Stone Gates, a baker by trade,

θίνῳ, τὴν τέ- χνην ἀρτοπο- ιίας, ἐκτισάμ- ην τὸ κοιμητήριο ν σὺν τῇ γυναικί μου Καλημέρᾳ καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις.	acquired this *koimeterion*, together with my wife, Kalemera, and (our) children..

9 - Nicaea (Akçapınar): Destephen. No. 268; No. 555 in Şahin (1979); 2.20 in Johnson (1995): 75

Αὐρ(ήλιος) Χρύσανθος κατεσκεύασα τὸ κοιμητήριον ἐμαυτῷ καὶ τῇ γλυκυτάτῃ μου συνβίῳ Βαλερίᾳ καὶ τοῖς πενθεροῖς μου Αὐρηλίῳ Ἀντιόχῳ καὶ τῇ συνβίῳ αὐτοῦ Ἀφροδισίᾳ Αὐρηλίᾳ καὶ τοῖς γλυκυτάτοις αὐτῶν ἐγγόνοις εἰς τὸ χαρισθὲν ἡμῖν παρασπόριον ὑπὸ Αὐρ(ηλίου) Ἀγγελίου. εἴ τις δὲ σκύλῃ τὸ κοιμητήριον, ὁ ἄνομος δώσει λόγον Θεῷ ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως καὶ τῷ ταμίῳ ρ'. χαίρετε.	I, Aurelios Chrysanthos, constructed this koimeterion for myself, for my dearest wife Valeria, for my in-laws, Aurelios Antiochos and his wife, Aphrodisia Aurelia, and for their beloved grandchildren in the parasporion graciously given to us by Aurelios Agelios. If anyone should violate the koimeterion, the lawbreaker will give account to God on Judgment Day and pay the treasury 100 denarii. Farewell.

11 - Nicomedia (Tuzla): Destephen. No. 269; Hasluck (1905): 63-4.

Αὐρ. Ἡρακλῆς Γαΐου, οἰκῶν ἐν ἐμπορίῳ Καλῷ Ἀγρῷ, κὲ ἡ τούτου γυνὴ Αὐρ. Ἀντω- νῖνα ἐποιήσαμεν ἑαυτοῖς ζῶντες κὲ φρονοῦντες στήλλην μνήμην ἑαυτῶν ζώντων, κα[τεχόν]των τῶν κληρονο[μιῶν αὐτῶ]ν πολλοῖς	Aur(elius) Heracles, son of Gaius, living in the trade district of Kalos Agro, and his wife, Aur(elia) Antonina, while still alive and in sound mind, made this memorial stele for themselves as a remembrance of their lives, and [holding possession] of their inheritance for many

ἔτεσιν αὐτῷ [ἐξο]υσίᾳ (ν εἰ) δέ τις ἕτερος [τολμήσι] ἐπιβουλεῦ- σαι, ταύτη(ν) τὴ(ν) τιμὴν δοῦναι τῷ ταμείῳ ἀργυροῦ λίτρας ι καὶ τοῦτο ἔγραψα διὰ τῶν τινῶν κακουργίας· (ε)ἰ δέ τις δ' ἂν τολμήσι, μετελθῇ αὐτὸν ὁ θεός. Χαίρετε, πα- ροδίτε.	years under their [authority]. If, however, anyone else dares [to attempt] to harm it, let them pay this fine: 10 pounds of silver to the treasury. And this I have written to guard against malice. If anyone dares to commit such an act, may God bring punishment upon them. Farewell, travelers.

12 - Nicomedia (İzmit): Destephen. No. 271; 3.14 in Johnson (1995): 107

Εὐμοίριος Πάπος Ἀράδιος ξυλο γλύφος κῖμε λείψανον ἐν θάδε, πρόμοι ρος κακῶν ἐτῶν † μα′· Χαίρετε παροδῖτε.	Eumoirios Papos, a citizen of Arados, a wood carver, lies here before his time, remnant of 41 unlucky years. † Farewell passerby.

13 - Nikaea: N/A in Destephen; No. 554 in Şahin (1979); 3.17 in Johnson (1995): 108

Αὐρ(ήλιος) Σπουδάσις Νικειυ[ς] ₽ κηπουρὸς οἰκῶν ἐν φυλῇ Αὐρηλ(ιανῇ) ζῶν ἐμαυ[τῷ] κατεσκεύ[ασα] καὶ τῇ σεμνο- τάτῃ μου συνβίῳ Αὐρ(ηλίᾳ) Θεοδ[ώρα].	I, Aurelios Spoudasis, a citizen of ₽ Nikaea, an orchard keeper, living in the Phyle Aureliana, while still living, constructed (this) for myself and for my most revered wife, Aurelia Theodora.

14 - Amisos (Samsun): No. 272 in Destephen; No. 11 in Anderson et al. (1910): 21

Χρήστος Σαμβατδίᾳ ἰδίᾳ συνβίῳ μνείας χάριν ἐποίησα. Τοῖς παροδίταις χαίρειν.	Chrestos [erected this] for Sambatis, his own companion, as a token of remembrance. Farewell to those who pass by.

15 - Amisos (Themiscyra / Çarşamba): No. 273 in Destephen; No. 15 in Anderson et al. (1910): 26-7

Λούκιος Κάσάνδρο[υ] τοῖς παρὰγουσι χαίρειν. Ἐποίησεν μνῆμα ἑαυτῷ καὶ τῇ γυναικὶ καὶ φύσι τέκνοις καὶ ἀδ(ε)λφοῖς· ὥστε μὴ ἔξὼν ἄλλον νεκρὸν [εἶναι τού]δε ὑποκισθέ τάφου· ὃς δὲ ἀντ?]έχει ἐμοῖς [κληρο]νόμοις, κατὸ(ρ)κισα διὰ Θεὸν τὸν Ζῶντα	Lucius, son of Cassander, greets those who pass by. He made this tomb for himself, his wife, his natural children, and his brothers, so that it may not be lawful for another corpse to be buried in this tomb. Whoever takes possession against my heirs, I have placed under oath by the Living God.

16 - Andrapa (Vezirköprü): No. 274 in Destephen; No. 72 in Anderson et al. (1910):

Αὐρ(ήλιον) Δομνί- λον τὸν (φιλό)- θεον καὶ (φιλό)- χῆρον πρεσβύ- τερον γενόμε- νον ὅλοβιον, τροδόρο[ς] μνῆ- μης χάριν ἔτ- σα... δῷ τῷ ταμείῳ (δηνάρια) ἀφ'.	Aur(elius) Domnilos, the God-loving and poor-loving *presbyter*, having become complete in life, a benefactor in remembrance, may [he/she/it] give to the treasury 250 denarii.