



## Nicaea, the nature of God and the construction of knowledge

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### Abstract

This article examines operative approaches to knowledge in the 4th century, with a focus on the Council of Nicaea. It explores how such an investigation might be shaped and its implications for defining God amid trinitarian controversies. Informed by the History of Knowledge, Late Antique Studies, Foucault's insights and contemporary scholarship, the interdisciplinary study addresses a gap in Nicaean scholarship. It briefly engages the "arena of knowledge" – church-state dynamics, Neoplatonic influence, education, and recent research. Four dimensions are analysed: knowledge's circulation, materiality, form, and character. Aspects such as rhetoric, intellectual agency, friendship, stenography, letters, and anathemas are discussed. Six directions of knowledge in 4th century Christianity are identified, revealing polar tensions that define Nicaea's distinctive episteme. The article suggests a novel perspective on the study of Nicaea and the doctrine of God while noting the need for further study.

### Keywords

*episteme; God; History of Knowledge; homoousios; knowledge; Nicaea; Trinity*

### Introduction

This article explores the concept of knowledge in the 4th century, particularly regarding decisions made about the nature of God. It investigates how intentional analysis of the production, form, and character of knowledge might reshape our understanding of key theological events, such as the Council of Nicaea. The *research problem* is twofold: it seeks to

define the contours of such an investigation and to assess its impact on the construction of knowledge about God in the trinitarian controversies.

Focusing on knowledge brings a certain methodological inevitability: the need to engage with the entire scholarly discourse surrounding the Council and the Creed. While this is a complex and demanding task, it encourages integration across various areas of specialisation. The approach adopted is thus *structural*, referencing multiple dimensions without delving deeply into each. A *multi- and interdisciplinary* framework is employed, drawing from three academic fields: Late Antiquity, the History of Knowledge, and Philosophy – specifically Foucault’s post-structuralism.

The study of Late Antiquity has undergone a significant transformation since the late 1950s, shifting away from narratives of decline to more nuanced perspectives of transformation and continuity. Common descriptors now include “transition,” “change,” and “evolution” (Marcone 2020:8). Brown (2011:8) notably asserted that “there was life after the third century,” indicating a more vibrant, complex view of this era. The field has expanded chronologically (into the 7th century), geographically, and thematically. Cameron (2020:292) highlights the often uneasy yet fruitful relationship between Patristics and Late Antiquity, emphasising the latter’s “capaciousness” and its ability to accommodate a broad spectrum of scholarly interests. Brown (2011:12) underlines the period’s cohesion, noting its “unbroken tissue” across centuries despite growing religious divergences.

The “History of Knowledge” has emerged since the mid-2010s as a distinct discipline, differing from the Philosophy of Science, History of Ideas, or Cultural History. Its focus lies on how knowledge arises, circulates, and functions within society – not whether it is true or valid (Östling & Heidenblad 2023:5–7; 2020:4). Knowledge is treated as a socially and historically conditioned phenomenon that permeates all aspects of life. The field aims to integrate diverse academic insights while also generating new ones (Östling & Heidenblad 2020:1). Four core concepts – circulation, arena, actor, and institution – structure the analysis (Östling & Heidenblad 2023:16–31). An illustrative case is Bod’s (2022) global history of knowledge, which traces “patterns” and “principles” across cultures and eras, from the Palaeolithic to modernity. These patterns (regularities) and

principles (underlying structures) are seen as essential for human survival and knowledge formation (Bod 2022:2f). Importantly, Bod (2022:305, 315) warns against teleological narratives, emphasising that each historical period is governed by its own unique intellectual pursuits.

Foucault's thought has occasionally influenced scholarship on Early Christianity. Newheiser (2013) explores how his work informs Patristics, even referencing Nicaea as an example. For Newheiser (2013:87), Foucault's value lies in recognising that "certain ways of thinking emerge under particular conditions," thus rejecting the notion of timeless ideas. This aligns with Foucault's broader project in *The Order of Things* (1970), where he investigates the "conditions of possibility" for knowledge and its structural arrangements or epistemes (Foucault 1970:xxii). Central to his analysis is the evolving relationship between language and the world. In the Renaissance, words and things were seen as resembling each other. The Classical period introduced representation, distancing words from things. In the modern era, human beings become the epistemic center, and language becomes self-referential. May (2006:55f.) highlights that Foucault resists viewing these shifts as progressive; instead, he examines the underlying configurations that enable knowledge in each era.

Taken together, these three fields – Late Antiquity, History of Knowledge, and Foucault's epistemology – offer a rich interdisciplinary framework. They suggest that the theological debates of the fourth century, including those at Nicaea, should be understood not merely as doctrinal developments, but as deeply embedded in the epistemic structures, social arenas, and material conditions of the time.

## **Available scholarship**

The Council and Creed of Nicaea have seldom been examined through the lens of knowledge, though recent scholarship provides valuable entry points into this perspective. Key contributions include edited volumes by Chin and Vidas (2015a), Amsler (2023a), Ayres, Champion, and Crawford (2023a), a monograph by Letteney (2023), and a pivotal article by Stefaniw (2018), which together suggest new directions for interpreting Nicaea in epistemological terms.

Chin and Vidas (2015b:1–13) highlight “order” as central to Late Antique epistemology, presenting knowledge production as “practices of ordering” (2015b:9), underpinned by a drive to unify reality through a singular rationality (2015b:7, 11). Ayres (2015:134) echoes this in his view of Christian theology as a structuring force, with Nicene theology offering a “Trinitarian order” that linked divine and cosmic structures. Amsler’s volume (2023b:1–28) emphasises the materiality of knowledge, arguing that knowledge cannot be separated from its modes of production and transmission. She further expands epistemic agency by highlighting contributions from marginalised groups such as slaves, women, and socially subordinate men (2023b:15).

In Early Christian Studies, growing interest in epistemology is evident in the volume by Ayres, Champion, and Crawford (2023a), which explores “modes of knowing” and the “ordering of knowledge” across discourse, institutions, and material culture. They situate Christian knowledge practices within the broader Roman imperial and educational context (2023b:3). Letteney’s (2023) study presents a focused analysis of fourth-century developments, showing how Nicene debates introduced a new theological method. This shift redefined argumentation and even influenced manuscript formats (2023:5, 15). Central to his argument is Athanasius, whose work demonstrates a move from scriptural synthesis to creedal regulation, thereby asserting that Scripture alone was insufficient for theological authority (2023:76). In this framework, creeds functioned as paratexts – essential interpretive frameworks.

Stefaniw (2018:268) submits a conceptual scaffold through her six “generative components” of the Late Antique episteme: patrimony, curation, mimesis, oikonomia, cosmos, and the subject-object relation. The first four align with tradition, pedagogy, ethics, and theological economy. “Cosmos” reflects a participatory model of knowing, while the subject-object relation emphasizes epistemic embeddedness – knowledge emerges through lived, embodied experience. Her work underscores the inseparability of cosmology, textuality, ethics, and self-formation (2018:288).

Together, these studies validate this article’s project: a focused analysis of Nicene knowledge. While the broader field has engaged with knowledge practices in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity, Nicaea itself remains

underexplored from this angle. This article addresses that gap by investigating Nicaea as a site of theological knowledge production and form.

Recognizing knowledge as a dynamic, multilayered construct, the article follows Renn (2020:63f) in treating it as cognitive, social, and material. It adopts the framework of the History of Knowledge field, which defines knowledge as historically and socially constructed, rather than purely propositional or metaphysical (cf. Östling & Heidenblad 2023:5–7). Accordingly, the analysis centres on *four dimensions*: (a) the production of knowledge about God, (b) the forms in which this knowledge was articulated, (c) its material dimensions and (d) its performative role in shaping theological and ecclesial life. This multifaceted approach moves beyond abstract metaphysical inquiry to a grounded, interdisciplinary understanding of theological knowledge in the fourth century.

Before turning to these four dimensions, the article first gives a brief contextual mapping of Nicaea, establishing the historical and epistemic framework necessary to understand the Council as a key moment in Christian knowledge formation.

## Arena of knowledge

Knowledge must be understood within its historical context. The Council of Nicaea, therefore, should be viewed as an epistemic “arena” shaped by *four key constituents: church–state relations, philosophical framework, education, and scholarly reconstructions of the 4th century*. Mulsow (2019:163) refers to “knowledge cultures”; knowledge is always embedded in a particular situation.

### (a) Church-state relations

Knowledge in this period was inextricable from the evolving church–state dynamic. Drake (2008; 2021) gives a nuanced account of how theological and political power became entangled following the Edict of Milan (313), which introduced religious freedom and ushered in Constantine’s reign (Drake 2008:447, 449). During this time, emperors increasingly engaged with theological debates. Understanding this relationship requires recognising how divine favour was thought to ensure imperial prosperity

(Drake 2008:455). This dual belief – in divine intervention<sup>1</sup> and the emperor’s religious duty – explains Constantine’s role at Nicaea, which Drake (2021:130) argues was neither intrusive nor domineering. His letter to Alexander and Arius illustrates his concern for unity. Drake’s interpretation emphasises a broader power shift: rather than distinguishing “Church and Empire,” he stresses their entanglement. Christianity introduced a novel dynamic whereby the bishop became the central figure mediating between the divine and the state. Consequently, even imperial authority came to be seen as proceeding from the Church (Drake 2008:454, 457–459). This inversion recasts the period as one of “church state,” not “state church.” Knowledge, then, must be interpreted through this lens of power and religious authority. Understanding how knowledge was created and authorised at Nicaea demands attentiveness to this interwoven structure of power, state and church.

*(b) Philosophical framework*

Understanding 4th century knowledge requires recognising how deeply Christian thought was embedded in the Graeco-Roman intellectual tradition, particularly Neoplatonism. Patristic theology functioned as a philosophical school in its own right. Since Christ was identified as the Logos, theology had to be rationally structured to be credible in its context. Scholars such as Zachhuber (2020:1ff), Edwards (2021b:1f), Ramelli (2022:421ff), and Löhr (2010) affirm that early Christian thinkers saw no opposition between theology and philosophy – biblical exegesis was always “informed by philosophy” (Edwards 2021b:11). Among ancient schools, Christianity engaged most substantially with Platonism. As Janby et al. (2019:6) note, Platonism had an “enabling effect,” offering conceptual tools – especially in metaphysics – for articulating Christian doctrine. Plotinus’ thought, central to Late Antique Neoplatonism, exemplified the “theistic turn of paganism” (Kenney 2021:167), emphasising the transcendent One and the emanation of Intellect and Soul. In this metaphysical hierarchy, unity remains asymmetrically related to multiplicity (Halfwassen 2014:186). However, Christian thinkers never adopted Platonism uncritically. While deeply shaped by its categories – transcendence, unity, hypostases – they

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1 The belief in Divine power was pervasive. See the important volume of essays on this theme by Marmodoro & Viltanioti (2017).

maintained theological independence, appropriating philosophical tools without fully assimilating their frameworks.<sup>2</sup>

(c) *Education*

In Late Antiquity, knowledge was closely tied to educational practices. As Lössl (2019:27, 33) notes, Christianity lacked its own system of “higher” education during the time of Constantine and Constantius II and thus depended on existing pagan institutions teaching grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy. This reliance made classical education a dominant cultural force within Christian intellectual life. Crucially, such an education enabled participation in public discourse and access to influential roles, including that of bishop (Lössl 2019:28). Grammar and rhetoric, in particular, were highly valued, shaping how theological arguments were framed and transmitted. The pervasive influence of rhetoric is found in scholarship on Nicaea, but the impact of grammarians is conspicuously neglected.<sup>3</sup> The language rule is an area that requires investigation when studying Nicaea.

(d) *Scholarly reconstruction*

Reconstructing “knowledge in the 4th century” involves navigating layers of mediation shaped by generations of scholarship. We access this period only through scholarly interpretations, especially concerning the Arian controversy and the Council of Nicaea. Foundational works include Hanson (1988/2005), followed by Ayres (2004b), Behr (2004), and Anatolios (2011). Kim’s *Cambridge Companion to Nicaea* (2021) shares current bibliographic overviews, while Kinzig’s (2024) monumental study on creeds supersedes Kelly (1972/2008). Influential articles, such as Barnes (1998), further illustrate the field’s complexity. Seven key scholarly perspectives are notable: There was no orthodoxy or shared theological vocabulary in the early 4th century; Arius’ theology was a strand within logos theology (Hanson 1989:1943; Barnes 1998:47). The debate should begin with broader theological traditions, not Arius alone (Ayres 2004a:421-426).

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2 In a sophisticated treatment, Radde-Gallwitz (2021:58, 69ff, 75ff) develops a “sympathetic picture” of pro-Nicene Trinitarianism’s relation to Platonism and finds the greatest substantive influence on Christian thought in the area of a metaphysics of participation (for example, the relationship of participation between Word and God).

3 The study by Kaster (1988) has become a classic on the grammarians as custodians of language traditions.

Arius' position must be distinguished from the 350s' controversy, which Athanasius shaped rhetorically (Ayres 2004a:422; Barnes 1998:54).<sup>4</sup> Origen's theology, particularly on distinct subsistences and eternal generation, heavily influenced later divergence (Anatolios 2007:432). Nicaea failed to deliver a consensus, with "three strikes against it": modalist interpretation, materialist overtones, and unscriptural terms (Hanson 1989:146; Barnes 1998:49). Establishing orthodoxy took decades. Current scholarship emphasises phases in reception history up to Constantinople (381) (Smith 2011:110–117). Ayres (2004a:436, 444) sees 360–380 as the consolidation of a "pro-Nicene theological culture", extending beyond terminology to include worldview, imagination, and practice.

For the Council of Nicaea itself, studies by Edwards (2006), Gwynn (2021), and Kinzig (2023) provide reconstructions – though much remains uncertain (Gwynn 2021:90). Attendance estimates shift focus from the 200–225 bishops to the larger context of 2,000 people, including entourages (Gwynn 2021:95). Most bishops came from the Greek-speaking East, with new attention to lesser-known participants (Gwynn 2021:95, 107). Kinzig (2023:219–222) recounts that a proposed creed by Eusebius of Nicomedia was rejected due to Arian content, followed by Eusebius of Caesarea's creed, which a committee revised. The final creed likely drew on the Rule of Faith, Eusebius' version, and probably the creed of Antioch. The controversial term *homoousios* remains debated, though Edwards (2006:563) suggests only Constantine could have persuaded unanimous acceptance in 325.

## Circulation of knowledge

To capture the dynamic flow of 4th century Christian thought, this article prefers the term "circulation" of knowledge over "production", highlighting *four key practices as knowledge-generators: biblical interpretation, rhetoric and disputation, intellectual agency, and theological discourse*. Each warrants a detailed study, but only brief mention is possible here.

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4 Williams (1992:102) remarks: "The time has probably come to relegate the term 'Arianism' at best to inverted commas, and preferably to oblivion."

*(a) Biblical interpretation*

Theological controversies of the 4th century were fundamentally interpretive disputes over Scripture. Extensive scholarship explores Patristic exegesis (e.g. Kannengiesser 2006; Blowers & Martens 2019), including its role in trinitarian debates (Beeley & Weedman 2018). Ayres (2019) underscores how interpretation was not neutral – it was shaped by philosophical argumentation. Modes of reading and reasoning were intertwined (Ayres 2019:439). Scripture served a threefold function: it initiated, constrained, and interrupted Christian thinking (Ayres 2019:440). Athanasius’ treatment of Proverbs 8:22 exemplifies two dynamics: reliance on pre-existing theological frameworks and use of classical literary-critical techniques. Interpretations were guided by tradition, conviction, and ancient disciplines like rhetoric and grammar (Ayres 2019:439, 446).<sup>5</sup>

*(b) Rhetoric and disputation*

Rhetoric pervaded Late Antique culture and deeply shaped theological knowledge. It was inseparable from disputation and exegesis, especially in trinitarian discourse. Kennedy (1983:197–207) analyses the Council of Nicaea through rhetorical theory, referring to stasis theory. He sees a reversal of standard procedure: rejection of Arianism came before doctrinal formulation. Deliberative rhetoric – focused on future outcomes – took precedence over judicial rhetoric. Kennedy (1983:203) also highlights “external rhetoric”, including logistical and ceremonial elements like imperial interventions, threats of excommunication, and the Council’s Senate-like structure. Terms such as *homoousios* were rhetorically charged; their definition was central to the debate (Kennedy 1983:205f). Even the invocation of the Holy Spirit served rhetorical purposes. Ultimately, the Council’s legal force rested in episcopal signatures and imperial enforcement. Lim (1995a; 1995b) situates disputation within the urban unrest of Late Antiquity. Previously, Christian disagreements were handled by mediation, but in the 4th century, public debates became sources of social tension. Three factors drove this shift: a spirit of contention, an insistence on exact definitions, and the broad popularisation of theological discourse (Lim 1995b:216). Lim (1995b:223f) attributes the change to the

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5 Hanson (1988/2005:824–849) gives a particular helpful discussion of the entire issue of the use of Scripture.

rise of philosophical dialectic, a rigorous, combative method requiring specialized language and privileging intellectual precision. These developments redefined public theological engagement and reshaped knowledge circulation in the Christian world.

*(c) Intellectual agency*

A key factor in the circulation of knowledge during the 4th century was individual intellectual agency – how persons created and interpreted theological ideas. This can be outlined in five points: (i) Revisionist assessments: Beeley (2012) reconsiders major figures, offering renewed respect for Eusebius of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus, while critically reassessing Athanasius. This challenges simplistic “hero/villain” narratives in earlier theological histories. (ii) Major theological voices: Debates over Christ’s relation to God featured a wide cast of thinkers – Origen, Arius, Alexander of Alexandria, Ossius of Cordoba, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Constantine, Athanasius, Marcellus, Eunomius, and the Cappadocians – each contributing to a rich, contested doctrinal landscape, underscoring personal agency in shaping orthodoxy. (iii) Christian intellectuals: Ayres & Ward (2020:4) and Secord (2020:2, 8) portray Christian thinkers as embedded in the wider Roman intellectual world. They argue Christian and pagan intellectuals shared goals: prestige, influence, and imperial access. Christian theology drew upon and reworked pagan traditions, integrating them into new doctrinal frameworks. (iv) Bishops as elite knowledge agents: Bishops held unique positions as knowledge brokers due to their elite status. Rapp (2000:396) identifies key markers of this: noble lineage, ecclesial authority, wealth, education, and imperial proximity. These factors enabled bishops to shape theological discourse and assert doctrinal control. (v) Gender and exclusion: The intellectual field was overwhelmingly male, elite, and rationalist. Burrus (2000:187, 189) highlights the near-total exclusion of women from theological reasoning and divine representation, calling it a systematic “erasure” of the feminine in divine imagery. Though recent work (e.g., Cohick & Hughes 2017) has begun to recover women’s voices in the Patristic era, studies of their influence – particularly around councils – remain limited.<sup>6</sup> This points to a major scholarly gap and the need

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6 Pohlsander (1993:162f) interestingly refers to the role played by Constantia, the imperial woman, at the Council and her pro-Arian position.

for more inclusive frameworks. 4th century theological development was driven by elite male intellectuals embedded in imperial and ecclesiastical networks. They reinterpreted traditions and vied for influence in doctrinal debates. However, the exclusion of women and marginalised voices from this knowledge system demands critical reassessment and a broader, more inclusive approach to understanding theological agency.

*(d) Theological discourse*

The term “discourse” is difficult to apply strictly to theological developments in Late Antiquity, though Lössl (2016) argues it can be used. “Decision-making” may, however, be more accurate. Knowledge emerged through complex processes involving individuals (bishops, emperors), official assemblies (councils), structured argument (rhetoric), formal outcomes (creeds), and authority (signatures, anathemas). Graumann (2009:540, 554) urges greater focus on the mechanisms and assumptions underpinning theological discourse, identifying three key developments: the rising centrality of councils, an emphasis on precise creeds, and growing reverence for patristic literature. Of particular importance is the formulation of “precisely worded propositions of orthodoxy” and the insistence on technical theological language (Graumann 2009:541, 544). Councils, as decision-making bodies, played a pivotal role in shaping doctrine. MacMullen’s (2006) title, *Voting about God in the Early Church Councils*, underscores this centrality. One might provocatively suggest that “the trinitarian God was born in a Council.” MacMullen (2006: Chs. 2–5) explores the concrete dynamics of councils, identifying four interwoven dimensions: democratic (acclamation as voting), cognitive (intellectual debate), supernaturalist (belief in divine presence), and violent (conflict and coercion). Councils were marked by deep belief in divine intervention; bishops felt guided by spiritual forces (MacMullen 2006:42, 45). Voting often occurred through acclamation – shouting in support (MacMullen 2006:16, 20). This fervent religiosity, however, also fostered violence. MacMullen (2006:56) estimates that in the 250 years after Nicaea, doctrinal disputes caused at least 25,000 deaths. Thus, the formation of trinitarian doctrine reflects the complex and multifaceted nature of theological knowledge in Late Antiquity.

## Materiality of knowledge

The material dimension of knowledge about Nicaea has been underexplored, though Jacobs (2021) signals a growing interest in this area. Her contribution in the *Cambridge Companion* addresses logistical elements of the Council – relocation from Ancyra to Nicaea, venue specifics, travel, accommodation, and sustenance (Jacobs 2021:76–86). The key issue is how to define the “material dimension of knowledge.” Drawing on the “material turn” in the social sciences, as outlined by Mukerji (2015), this approach shifts focus from individual intellectual achievement to broader material and environmental factors – objects, spaces, and embodied human experiences (Mukerji 2015:7f). This perspective enables exploration of *four material aspects* relevant to Nicaea: *cities, friendship, literacy, and stenography*.

### (a) *Cities*

Urban contexts are often referenced in Patristic texts, particularly cities like Alexandria and Rome. Morgan (2021:92) explores 4th century Christian experiences of urban architecture, suggesting that places can shape, reinforce, or challenge faith. Although she doesn’t directly engage trinitarian disputes, her theoretical framing opens pathways for examining the spatial dynamics of doctrinal development.

### (b) *Friendship*

Historical narratives frequently mention alliances – Arius with Eusebius, Eunomius with Aetius – but rarely explore their social or cultural underpinnings. Manoussakis (2014) delves into this theme through the lens of Late Antique friendship, particularly between Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory the Great. His account blends theology and cultural analysis, presenting Christian friendship as a reciprocal gift shaped by a trinitarian ethos (Manoussakis 2014:175, 176, 190). This model suggests a fruitful avenue for integrating personal relationships into the study of doctrinal history.

### (c) *Literacy*

Literacy’s relevance is obvious in a context that produced written creeds. Harris (1989:328) reports literacy levels in Late Antiquity as low as 5%. Marksches (2020:199f) highlights widespread illiteracy even among bishops, citing instances where notaries signed council documents on

their behalf. This raises significant questions about how knowledge was recorded, transmitted, and authorised within ecclesial hierarchies.

*(d) Stenography*

Graumann (2021:113-175) makes a major contribution to understanding the material aspects of Council acts, focusing especially on stenographers. Although documentation for Nicaea is notably sparse, his work – largely centred on the post-Nicene period – provides a crucial framework for understanding how conciliar records were produced and preserved.<sup>7</sup> It also highlights the technical and logistical challenges inherent in the transmission of doctrinal decisions.

Together, these four areas – urban space, social relations, textual production, and recording practices – illustrate how material factors shaped the Council of Nicaea. They suggest a shift away from purely intellectual histories to a more integrated understanding of how doctrine emerged within concrete historical, cultural and material conditions.

## Shape of knowledge

The Council of Nicaea represents a distinct *creedal form* of knowledge, yet its function and impact must be contextualised within broader realities. *Three key phenomena* emerge in this regard: *genre*, *epistolary literature*, and the creed itself, with a focus on its *anathemas*.

*(a) Genre and the organisation of knowledge*

Genre theory highlights how texts function to structure knowledge. Rafferty (2022:121–129) underscores that genres are coded forms, organising information into recognisable categories within social and communicative systems. The Nicene Creed, as a genre, performed a specific theological and communal role. It gave theological propositions a socially embedded, performative form aimed at shaping Christian identity. In this sense, creeds were not merely doctrinal summaries but tools of institutional formation and boundary-setting.

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7 One finds increased interest in the role of scribes and their social status. See the interesting study by Moss (2023) on the possibility that some of them could have been slaves. This is part of an effort to distribute agency across a wider range of characters.

(b) *Letters as infrastructure*

In the 4th century Arian controversy, letters became central to theological debate and ecclesiastical politics. Feichtinger (2023:163, 165, 167) reframes correspondence as part of an “infrastructure of faith,” emphasising the mobility of texts and the material conditions – scribes, transport, roads – that enabled their transmission. Letters served not only argumentative and strategic purposes but also reflected broader social and logistical networks. The collection of texts compiled by Fernández (2024) confirms the dominance of epistolary exchange in shaping theological knowledge and alliances.

(c) *The Creed and its anathemas*

The Creed of Nicaea, while part of a larger creedal tradition (see Kelly 1972/2008; Kinzig 2024), stands out for its anathemas – its condemnatory clauses. Although Arius is not named, the anathemas explicitly target his Christological views: the temporal origin of the Son, creation *ex nihilo*, derivation from a different *ousia*, and mutability. Their rhetorical density (Edwards 2024:281) ensured that heretical positions were thoroughly excluded. The general wording suggests a strategic moderation, while phrases like “Catholic and apostolic church” emphasise ecclesial authority. Kinzig (2024:266–267) argues that these anathemas functioned as a juridical counterpart to the Creed’s declarations, shifting it from a confession of faith to a quasi-legal instrument, particularly when combined with signatures (sometimes coerced) and threats of exile. Radde-Gallwitz (2023) highlights the underappreciated significance of these anathemas. They structured a new epistemology – “a different ordering of knowledge” (Radde-Gallwitz 2023:227) – and played a formative role in subsequent doctrinal developments. Post-Nicene synods (of 341, 344, 351) returned to these anathemas, expanding and refining them. They became central in adjudicating orthodoxy (Radde-Gallwitz 2023:244), forming the initial basis for defining heresy. The anathemas thus had a *Nachleben* – a living afterlife – that shaped theological evolution well beyond 325. The transition from a legal to liturgical context was gradual, as the creed first served as a judicial instrument in ecclesial disputes.

## Construction of God knowledge

This section turns to the central concern: the construction of knowledge about God in Early Christianity, developed through *five areas* – *background theological developments*, *4th century interpretive categories*, *the Nicene Creed*, *the term homoousios*, and *the Cappadocian settlement* and the Council of Constantinople.

### (a) Background developments

The Arian controversy and Nicaea were part of a broader, ongoing process of theological interpretation, tracing back to the earliest followers of Jesus. From the beginning, worship of Christ was accompanied by efforts to articulate his identity through formulaic expressions. Interpretation was intrinsic to discipleship. Ayres and Radde-Gallwitz (2008) provide a pivotal overview of scholarly reassessments of the early Christian doctrine of God. They challenge the outdated dichotomy between philosophy and biblical tradition, showing that the path to orthodoxy was complex, polemical, and shaped by multiple traditions. Arius was not a theological anomaly but “a flashpoint for a battle between pre-existing and already divergent traditions of thought” (Ayres & Radde-Gallwitz 2008:867). Central to pro-Nicene theology was a firm Creator-creation distinction and commitment to divine simplicity, incomprehensibility, and immutability. Importantly, the three divine persons were seen as jointly expressing divine simplicity. Ayres and Radde-Gallwitz (2008:876) also highlight the link between knowing God and spiritual transformation, suggesting that theological knowledge includes growth in humility and virtue – a form of negative theology.

Pre-4th-century theological developments laid important groundwork. Efforts to conceptualise monotheism and Christology are evident in *logos* theology, monarchianism, Origen’s theory of eternal generation, and evolving uses of *hypostasis*. These early attempts sought to preserve unity while accounting for divine differentiation, forming the intellectual landscape inherited by 4th century theologians.

### (b) Interpretive categories

Given the diversity of 4th century theology, scholars attempt finer classifications than the simple Arian-versus-Nicene narrative. Anatolios

(2011:30ff), for example, proposes a two-fold schema based on how divine unity is conceived – either as unity of being (ontology) or unity of will (intentionality). He insists that every major voice, including those later labelled subordinationists or modalists, began with a shared confession of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Within this matrix, he groups Alexander of Alexandria, Athanasius, and the Cappadocians, for they ground unity in common divine being, while Arius, Asterius, Eusebius, and Eunomius locate unity in the concord of wills (Anatolios 2011:31). Each cluster shows internal affinities yet also distinct theological developments, revealing a spectrum rather than a binary divide.

(c) *Creed*

This section turns to the Nicene Creed and its construal of God. While its complex textual history – from Eusebius to Chalcedon – cannot be fully explored here, a methodological note is warranted. Though scholars such as Kinzig (2024) examine source dependence, few address interpretive methodology. Fernández (2016:298) rightly critiques an unbalanced focus on *homoousios*, neglecting broader dynamics. A more comprehensive reading strategy should include socio-theological context, form, language, and reception. A socio-rhetorical approach, attentive to rhetorical situation, strategy, and aim, may integrate these dimensions and foreground the rhetorical construction of theological knowledge.

The Creed employs a clear rhetorical strategy: rather than simply denouncing Arius, it offers a precise, positive declaration. Young (2006:468) refers to a “discourse of precision.” Each term is deliberate and contributes to constructing theological knowledge. The structure is trinitarian, beginning with belief in one God – a monotheistic affirmation – but also invoking the scriptural concept of *archē* (origin).<sup>8</sup> The Creed addresses the heart of the Arian controversy through “sameness” language: both Father and Son are described as God, true God, creator, and light (Barnes 1998:50f), rejecting any notion of hierarchy or graded divinity. The language is hybrid – both biblical and philosophical. Terms like *ousia* and *homoousios* serve a rhetorical aim rather than speculative metaphysics. Omissions

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8 Behr (2018:320f, 330) discusses the logic of the precise order of the four words – One God Father Almighty. In this instance, one finds a specification of divinity (Fatherhood of the Son) and of omnipotence (work through the weakness of the Son).

are also rhetorically significant; the absence of references to the Father’s “will” or “Logos” subtly excludes subordinationist readings. Repetition of “begotten/only begotten” underscores the Son’s divine origin (Barnes 1998:48f). Edwards (2006; 2021a; 2024) provides a detailed interpretation across several works, highlighting how the Creed was designed to secure broad agreement – “neither strict nor latitudinarian” (Edwards 2006:564). He notes the strategic placement of *monogenēs* to emphasise eternal Sonship, distinct from incarnation (2021a:145). “From the *ousia* of the Father,” a gloss on *monogenēs*, is semantically equivalent to *homoousios* (Edwards 2021a:146).

(d) *Homoousios*

Wiles (1965:454) aptly describes *homoousios* as the most famous term in Christian doctrinal history, warranting focused attention. While the exact origin of the term is uncertain – whether it came from Constantine, Alexander, Osius, or even Hermogenes – Beatrice (2002:243) suggests that Constantine, influenced by Hermetic thought, may have introduced it. The term’s inclusion, despite lacking Scriptural basis, likely stemmed from its rhetorical function: it was a concept Arius could not apply to Christ (Wiles 1965:459), countering his biblically grounded claims. Scholars offer interpretive insights into the term’s function. Skarsaune (1987:50) notes its late placement in the Creed, implying it should be read in light of earlier affirmations. Barnes (1998:48) highlights the Creed’s statements of origin as key for grasping its meaning – the Son’s unique derivation from the Father. Edwards (2006:562) sees *homoousios* as paraphrased in “God from God” and “from the *ousia* of the Father,” reinforcing both the Son’s divine origin and his distinction from creation (Edwards 2021a:147; 2024:281). Kinzig (2024:259) affirms this interpretation: the term signals the ontological unity and incomparability of Father and Son, distinguishing their relationship from that of all created beings.

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9 For a discussion of interpretations of “begetting” language, see DelCogliano (2022:81f, 98f).

### (e) Cappadocian settlement

The Creed of Nicaea is often linked with the Council of Constantinople (381), especially regarding its reception.<sup>10</sup> Key changes include the omission of “from the *ousia* of the Father” and the addition concerning the Holy Spirit. The Cappadocian Fathers are conventionally credited with resolving trinitarian tensions through the formula “one nature and three persons,” known as the “Cappadocian settlement.” This allowed for affirming both divine unity and personal distinctions within the Trinity. However, several clarifications are necessary. The precise formula combining *ousia* and *hypostaseis* is absent from the 381 Creed, though it appears in a synodical letter to Western bishops in 382. Its official conciliar reception only occurs in the first canon of the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 (Anatolios 2007:448). Lienhard (1999:120f), who extensively examined the Cappadocian terminology, observes that the development of the formula reflects an increasing semantic differentiation between the terms. The formula is infrequent in their writings; Basil of Caesarea was particularly insistent on using it. Lienhard (1999:121) concludes that the Cappadocian settlement was both a gain – clarifying theological distinctions – and a loss, as it reduced the richness of earlier theological vocabulary.

## Character of knowledge

To consider the character of knowledge in the context of the Nicene Council and Creed is to follow Stefaniw’s (2018) framework of identifying “generative components.” *Six distinct epistemic movements or directions emerge: creativity, identity, power, performativity, tension, and innovation/disruption.*

### (a) Creativity

The trinitarian debates display immense intellectual effort and rhetorical sophistication in articulating the relationship between Jesus and the one God of Israel. This naming of the divine was a complex, collective project shaped by polemic and philosophical engagement. Collins (1998:131) identifies two forms of creativity: fractionation and synthesis. The former,

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10 The acts of the Council of Chalcedon contain the first official record of a Nicene-Constantinople Creed.

marked by polemical division, characterises the theological climate of 318–381. Ramelli (2022:420f) suggests that doctrinal precision reflected a desire to rival philosophical schools, while Kulikowski (2015:178) argues for an intrinsic drive toward *Ordo*, the elite Roman ideal of social order. This creativity can be seen as a confluence of intellectual, social, imperial, theological, and rhetorical forces.

### *(b) Identity*

The knowledge produced aimed not at discovery but at the definition of Christian identity, particularly through clarifying the relationship between Father and Son. This effort to draw internal boundaries established the notion of “orthodoxy.” Heather (2022:34–35) describes this shift as a doctrinal revolution, moving Christianity from a network of local communities to a unified faith system. Cameron (2013:349–361) critiques this process, highlighting the “cost of orthodoxy”: polemic replacing dialogue, intolerance, legal enforcement, and exile. She terms this the “technologizing” of theological dispute – a process where intellectual precision was prioritised at the expense of open engagement. Together, these trajectories show how theological knowledge at Nicaea was both creative and coercive, shaping Christian doctrine through both creative insight and structural power.

### *(c) Power*

The Nicene Council exemplifies a distinct manifestation of power. The emperor’s involvement, the prominence of bishops, the requirement of signatories, the pronouncement of anathemas, and the exile of dissenters contribute to the perception of elitism and coercion. The Nicene Creed thus functioned not only as a theological resolution but as a political tool to regulate clergy and suppress opposition. Kinzig (2024:465–484) stresses the Creed’s transformation into a legal instrument, underlining its exceptional normativity and role in the juridification of theology (Kinzig 2024:469). This legalistic turn marked a central development in the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, making creeds tools for enforcing orthodoxy and marginalising dissent. Galvão-Sobrinho (2013:6f) identifies a “rupture in the history of the church” arising from the Arian controversy: a shift from theological ambiguity to enforced precision, replacing consensus with suppression. This was more than the politicisation of belief – it entailed the

criminalisation of dissent (Galvão-Sobrinho 2013:84ff, 91ff). As doctrinal clarity became imperative, mechanisms of power intensified, aligning ecclesiastical authority with imperial force. In this light, theological knowledge was inextricably bound to legal, institutional, and disciplinary regimes.

*(d) Performativity*

Drawing on Hadot's (1995:265) view of philosophy as a "way of life," knowledge at Nicaea must be understood as existential and embodied. Ayres (2004b:326, 342) argues that pro-Nicene theology was a full *habitus* – a lived culture integrating Christology, cosmology, anthropology, and epistemology. Ascetic and purificatory practices were not peripheral but intrinsic to trinitarian thought, making knowledge *performative*: it shaped lives, habits, and ethics. Nilsson Hammar (2018:113) explores a tripartite model – *theoria, praxis, poiesis* – capturing knowledge as truth claims, practical wisdom, and technical/material expression. This reveals Late Antique knowledge as embedded in ritual and daily life, not abstract propositions. Asceticism and monasticism illustrate this unity of belief and lifestyle. Bowes (2008) draws attention to private worship, framing domestic spaces as theologically contested. She (2008:190) argues that the line between public orthodoxy and private devotion was porous, shaping heresiological discourse. This spatial ambiguity challenges assumptions about where and how theology was lived and disputed. Lastly, Brakke, Satlow, and Weitzman (2005) explore how theological discourse forms subjectivity. Although Nicaea is not their focus, their work deepens understanding of how doctrinal and performative knowledge reshapes the self. In this light, "self" may better capture the transformative force of Nicene theology than the traditional "way of life."

*(e) Tensions*

A 21st-century analysis of fourth-century theological knowledge reveals it to be marked by deep and persistent tensions. These emerge in at least *eight key polarities*: disputation vs. the Spirit's agency, biblical authority vs. Neoplatonic philosophy, terminological precision vs. divine incomprehensibility, episcopal authority vs. widespread illiteracy, elitist theology vs. social ordering, creedal formulation vs. ascetic life, church vs. empire, and orthodoxy vs. innovation. While these binaries may seem

contrived, they reflect genuine conflicts in cognitive expression. Their unresolved coexistence lends Nicene knowledge its *distinctive* character. Taken together, these tensions might be described as the *episteme* of the era – and more specifically, of Christianity in this formative period. Any inquiry into the relationship between God and knowledge in the fourth century must be situated within the framework of these polarities.

(f) *Innovation*

These tensions reflect a deeper metaphysical dialectic foundational to both Platonic philosophy and Christian theology: the *relation of the One to the Many*. This metaphysical challenge – how unity and multiplicity coexist – forms the heart of fourth-century trinitarian thought. The theological genius of the period lay in its capacity to reimagine unity and differentiation without collapse into either extreme. Maspero (2021) insists that reflection on the Trinity is inseparable from metaphysics and philosophy. He notes that ancient schools approached the One-Many tension through concepts such as emanation, gradation, and necessity – models that preserved unity but diminished relation. Christian thinkers, particularly Origen and the Cappadocians, reconfigured these categories. Origen linked *theologia* to the Trinity, and the Cappadocians introduced two decisive innovations: the absolute distinction between Creator and creation, and the redefinition of relation as intrinsic to divine substance (Maspero 2021:132, 134). This marked a decisive break from earlier metaphysics, making relation not a secondary quality but constitutive of divine being. Maspero (2021:135) summarises the Christian novelty as the idea of “a God who has relations in that He is relation.” The Logos is not a necessary intermediary bridging the One and the Many, but a freely given gift. This shift elevates freedom, relation, gift, and love as primary theological categories (Maspero 2014:38, 42f, 47ff). Through this lens, fourth-century theology appears not merely as a doctrinal resolution but as a metaphysical reimagining, forging a new understanding of God, self, and world.

## Conclusion

The fourth century marks a period of deep transformation across various spheres of life. Investigating knowledge within this context is both a scholarly imperative and a formidable task, given the breadth of available

reflection. Even when narrowed to the discourse on God, a multidisciplinary approach – particularly informed by Late Antiquity studies – proved essential and rewarding.

This research highlighted several key insights. Contemporary scholarship on Early Christianity and Late Antiquity demonstrates notable methodological shifts. Within this evolving landscape, knowledge emerges as a dynamic configuration shaped by imperial forces, rhetorical strategies, and epistemic tensions. The theological task of articulating the relationship between the Son and the Father – and thus defining the Christian God – unfolded within this complex framework. As creedal knowledge, it was contingent, hybrid, and often coercive, yet also strikingly bold and creative.

One of the study's central conclusions is the necessity of decentering traditional theological categories. Understanding the Creed and God cannot rest solely on terms like *homoousios*. Instead, the identity of Christ – and ultimately of God – was forged through a multifaceted process involving circulation, agency, form, and performance. Knowledge of God was neither static nor singular, but continually negotiated across intellectual, social, and material dimensions.

By centring on knowledge and exploring the dimensions of arena, circulation, form, materiality, and character, this study intimates a potential framework for investigating Nicaea that can be expanded in future research. This approach also places the question of identifying the Christian God within a richer and more nuanced context. Further exploration is needed – particularly in recovering the voices of marginalised groups and analysing the material manifestations of knowledge. Rather than serving as a final doctrinal statement, the Nicene Creed invites ongoing theological interpretation. It continues to inspire the naming and understanding of God across historical settings, encouraging reflection that is both historically grounded and theologically imaginative.

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