



CAMPANIA SACRA

Rivista di Storia Sociale e Religiosa del Mezzogiorno

57 (1/2026) - ISSN 0392-1352

Verbum Ferens

CAMPANIA SACRA

Rivista di Storia Sociale e Religiosa del Mezzogiorno

Pubblicazione semestrale della Pontificia Facoltà Teologica dell'Italia Meridionale
Sezione San Tommaso d'Aquino

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Editore

VERBUM FERENS Srl
Largo Donnaregina, 22 - 80138 Napoli

Abbonamenti

Italia € 50,00
Europa € 60,00
Altri paesi € 70,00
Sostenitore € 90,00

Conto corrente intestato a:

PFTIM - Sezione S. Tommaso IBAN: IT44 D030 6909 6061 0000 0015 382

Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Napoli n. 3804 del 27-10-1988

Quando non su invito, i contributi pubblicati sono sottoposti
al processo di doppio referaggio cieco.

FONTES NICAENAE SYNODI

CONSIDERAZIONI A MARGINE DI

S. FERNÁNDEZ (a cura di), *Fontes Nicaenae Synodi:*

The Contemporary Sources for the Study of the Council of Nicaea (304–337),

Contexts of Ancient and Medieval Anthropology 10,

Paderborn 2024, XXXVI + 301 pp.

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Among the many events and initiatives organized to mark the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea (325), particular mention must be made of Samuel Fernández's *Fontes Nicaenae Synodi: The Contemporary Sources for the Study of the Council of Nicaea (304–337)*, published in Paderborn in 2024 by Brill Schöningh. With this volume, Fernández offers a bold and substantial contribution: the collection and systematic arrangement of sources that address Nicaea in all its dimensions, assisting in the reconstruction of the events that led to the Council, narrated its proceedings, and recounted its effects.

These sources stem from works of various genres – historical, polemical, and apologetic – and thus require careful critical examination to assess their degree of reliability (p. XV), which depends not only on their chronological proximity to the events but also on the quality of the materials they draw upon and – one may add to the editor's reflection – the intention behind their transmission. For this reason, Fernández asserts the need to 'develop a method' (p. XV) for sifting and interpreting these documents, which appear layered in complex ways.

In the vast sea of works that treat or cite Nicaea, one may attempt to identify what the author calls *primary sources* (pp. XV; XVIII–XIX), essential for constructing a valid discourse on the historical reality under consideration – an event of such significance that it has elicited multiple readings. Fernández distinguishes these primary sources into three levels: historical narratives, testimonies of participants, and documents contemporary to the events.

Narratives, where they converge, confirm data and help integrate information where they preserve accounts of lost sources. Their distance from the events demands critical scrutiny, as they may not always rely on firsthand sources, or because the perspective from which they reconstruct the events is polarized around a single aspect or idea, at the expense of a broader and more nuanced view.

The second level comprises the testimonies of those who participated in the Council. These are certainly privileged documents, yet – as Fernández notes – one must take into account the personal involvement of the authors and their approach to the Nicene question. Without this awareness, one risks misinterpreting their accounts or reading them through partial lenses.

This leads to the third level: documents contemporary to Nicaea, which form the focus of the volume. These include letters, creeds, canons, theological declarations, and imperial reports transmitted in the form of quotations. This *traditio indirecta* requires the considerable effort of evaluating the texts by freeing them from the filters through which they have been handed down. Since they often appear in polemical works, they are cited either as grave errors or as definitive truths, and thus demand a recovery of their original meaning.

At this point, it is worth opening a parenthesis on the interpretation of Athanasius of Alexandria's narrative and the documents transmitted in his works. Athanasius is undoubtedly one of the principal sources for information on Nicaea 325, having participated directly as deacon to Bishop Alexander in all the phases preceding the Council and in its celebratory moments, later becoming one of the main actors in its aftermath. A portion of modern scholarship seems to adopt an excessively harsh stance toward Athanasius, manifesting a certain asymmetry in the treatment of witnesses. Instead, as Fernández hopes (pp. XVIII and XXVIII), one should maintain a critical gaze toward the sources, but not a disparaging one toward those who transmitted them – avoiding prejudgments and cultivating an openness to understanding.

Fontes Nicaenae Synodi is thus presented by Fernández as a συναγωγή (p. XXI), a gathering of documents relating to the themes addressed by the Council of Nicaea, spanning the period from 304 (beginning of the Meletian crisis) to 337 (death of Constantine), and transmitted indirectly through other works.

The volume is not intended as a comprehensive *opera omnia* on Nicaea, nor as an anthology (ἀνθολόγιον), but as a collection of sources concerning what was discussed at the Council.

Fernández identifies three criteria for selecting the texts: a chronological criterion, from the onset of the Meletian crisis – the first of the controversies addressed at Nicaea – to Constantine’s death, thus from 304 to 337; a thematic criterion, concerning the issues addressed by the conciliar assembly, such as the date of Easter; and a literary criterion, namely the consideration of documents transmitted in other works through indirect tradition.

It is therefore a collection that speaks of the Council of Nicaea without being bound solely to the theological question of Arianism. The author is aware that he may exclude authentic material on the Council that exceeds the indicated temporal limit, and that there are works not included in the volume, which he nonetheless duly notes, reasonably explains, and refers to (pp. XX–XXI). The value of his work lies in offering, on the issues addressed at Nicaea, a framework of sources from which study may begin. A valid tool, in fact, need not be exhaustive, and the claim to definitiveness on such matters is an illusory temptation that fascinates many, who thereby unfortunately limit their research. Yet at the same time, the challenge of attaining full knowledge is the engine that fuels the scholar’s hunger and shapes their stature – the more humble, the greater.

The volume thus aims to present the texts in their original language, accompanied by critical apparatus and references to the works from which they are extracted. The documents are numbered for easy identification and citation. Each document is also assigned a chronological indication – an essential element.

On this point, Fernández addresses a major issue: the chronological placement of the documents, a matter long debated among scholars, who seek to construct the most harmonious and coherent framework to account for the complexity and extraordinariness of the event. Fernández writes: "This task involves establishing their chronological location and placing them in their own cultural and theological tradition. Both tasks are difficult" (p. XIX).

This is a crucial and unavoidable theme, highlighted at one of the most significant conferences on Nicaea 325, held in Rome from April 2 to 5, 2025: *Nicaea 2025, Event, Context, Reception*, where scholar Uta Heil drew attention to the issue in her paper "Does Chronology Matter? Where History and Theology Meet in the Course of the Trinitarian Controversy Before and After Nicaea," soon to be published.

Fernández devotes several pages to this problem (pp. XXIII-XXXIV), presenting his own perspective as a clear starting point for further debate and research, with the aim of achieving ever greater clarity on Nicaea. One cannot overlook the fact that scholars often cite sources assuming a shared datum, while in reality they begin from differing chronological reconstructions that may lead to divergent and not easily reconcilable interpretations of the events.

As an example, one may cite the death of Bishop Philogonius of Antioch, dated by some scholars to December 324 or anticipated to 323 (pp. XXIX-XXX), which affects the temporal placement of certain letters and the weight assigned to the Council of Antioch in 325. Or consider the dating of the beginning of the Arian controversy, placed by Hans-Georg Opitz in his foundational edition of documents (*Athanasius Werke*, vol. 3, 1934) – to which all studies and this volume owe much – in 318, and repeatedly revised by scholars, from Eduard Schwartz in 1905 (*Gesammelte Schriften* 3, Berlin 1959, pp. 166-167) to William Telfer, who proposed 323 (When did the Arian controversy begin?, in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 47, 1946, 129-132). These studies have yielded divergent proposals: Opitz's long chronology (seven years) versus Schwartz's and Telfer's short durations

(18 and 22 months, respectively). A longer timeframe appears more appropriate for the unfolding of events, as also proposed by Manlio Simonetti in his monumental *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo* (1975).

Fernández has been generously meticulous in providing abbreviations for citing the texts, thereby assisting scholars and emphasizing the need for linguistic codes that render bibliographic citation clear and intelligible.

With this work, the author has remained faithful to the promise contained in the subtitle, offering access to the contemporary sources of Nicaea 325 so that research into this watershed event in ancient history – whose effects remain potent in today's world – may continue to bear fruit.



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