The so-called ‘Arian Controversy’ that divided the Christian Church in the 4th c. has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate in recent decades. The literary sources from which the majority of our knowledge of the controversy derives are highly polemical and distorted, written almost exclusively from the perspective of those whose positions would come to be accepted as ‘orthodox’, and this in turn has directly influenced scholarly interpretations of the material evidence from this crucial period in the history of the Church. In this paper I wish to reconsider that material evidence and ask how an archaeological approach independent of the biases of our literary sources might broaden our understanding of the controversy and its impact upon the 4th c. Roman empire.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘Arian Controversy’, as the doctrinal debates that divided the Christian Church in the 4th c. are traditionally known, began ca. 321 in a dispute between bishop Alexander of Alexandria and his presbyter Arius concerning the definition of the divinity of the Son and of His relationship with the Father.¹ This dispute had spread to involve almost the entire eastern Church by the time that Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor, united the empire under his rule through his defeat of his eastern rival Licinius in 324. The following year, Constantine summoned the first ecumenical council of the Christian Church at Nicaea in May 325. In the original Nicene Creed, the Son

¹ The standard modern account is that of Hanson (1988), although see also now Ayres (2004) and Behr (2004). The best account of Arius’ career and teachings is that of R. Williams (2001) 48–61, who presents the chronology of the early years of the controversy adopted here.
was declared to be *homoousios* (‘of one essence’) with the Father, a verdict that upheld the position of Alexander by maintaining the true divinity of Christ. Arius, who rejected the term *homoousios* and taught that the Son was God but not true God, was condemned and exiled and the doctrines attributed to him were anathematised.

Despite this apparently decisive verdict, however, the debate over the precise divinity and status of the Son continued unabated throughout the 4th c. A wide spectrum of theological positions and creedal statements emerged during this long period of controversy, until in 381 the second ecumenical Council of Constantinople, summoned by emperor Theodosius I, reasserted and refined the verdict of Nicaea. Even then divisions remained within the Christian empire, although the nature of those divisions now underwent a significant change. The conversion during the 4th c. of the Goths and other Germanic peoples to a form of Christian belief that those who defended the Nicene and Constantinopolitan-Nicene creeds regarded as ‘Arian’ brought a new dimension to the controversy, with sharper divisions upon ethnic and political as well as theological lines. In the period after 381 these divisions led to tension both in the East, particularly in the city of Constantinople itself, and above all in the West, where the ‘Arian’ rulers of the newly emerging Germanic kingdoms of the Visigoths, the Vandals and later the Ostrogoths faced potential conflict with the hierarchy of the ‘orthodox’ or ‘catholic’ Church within their realms.

It is not my intention here to present in full the complexity of the theological debates of the 4th c. The purpose of the current paper is more limited, to consider how and to what extent the archaeological evidence of material culture and topography can be applied to what is almost invariably studied as a literary theological controversy. It is of course true that it is the texts that provide the vast majority of our knowledge of 4th c. Christian doctrine, and thus it is the textual evidence that has established the framework within which modern scholars have usually approached the ‘Arian Controversy’. However, the texts that we possess are also almost without exception highly polemical and potentially distorted, particularly the writings of Athanasius of Alexandria (the successor of Alexander) who is our most important

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2 For a convenient summary of this extremely complex period, see Behr (2004) 61–122. Alongside those who maintained the Nicene formula that the Son and the Father were *homoousios*, other influential teachings held that the Son was *homoiousios* (‘of like substance’), *homoios* (‘like’) or indeed *anomoios* (‘unlike’) to the Father.