

Byzantine Iconoclasm

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The **Byzantine Iconoclasm** (Greek: Εἰκονομαχία, *Eikonomachía*) refers to two periods in the history of the Byzantine Empire when Emperors, backed by imperially-appointed leaders and councils of the Greek Orthodox Church, imposed a ban on religious images or icons. The "First Iconoclasm", as it is sometimes called, lasted between about 730 and 787, when a change on the throne reversed the ban. The "Second Iconoclasm" was between 814 and 842. Iconoclasm, Greek for "image-breaking", is the deliberate destruction within a culture of the culture's own religious icons and other symbols or monuments, usually for religious or political motives. People who engage in or support iconoclasm are called *iconoclasts*, a term that has come to be applied figuratively to any person who breaks or disdains established dogmata or conventions. Conversely, people who revere or venerate religious images are derisively called "iconolaters" (εἰκονολάτραι). They are normally known as "iconodules" (εἰκονόδουλοι), or "iconophiles" (εἰκονόφιλοι).

Iconoclasm may be carried out by people of a different religion, but is often the result of sectarian disputes between factions of the same religion. In Christianity, iconoclasm has generally been motivated by an "Old-Covenant" interpretation of the Ten Commandments, which forbid the making and worshipping of "graven images", see also Biblical law in Christianity. The two serious outbreaks of iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire during the 8th and 9th centuries were unusual in that the use of images was the main issue in the dispute, rather than a by-product of wider concerns.

As with other doctrinal issues in the Byzantine period, the controversy was by no means restricted to the clergy, or to arguments from theology. The continuing cultural confrontation with, and military threat from, Islam probably had a bearing on the attitudes of both sides. Iconoclasm seems to have been supported by many from the East of the Empire, and refugees from the provinces taken over by the Muslims. It has been suggested that their strength in the army at the start of the period, and the growing influence of Balkan forces in the army (generally considered to lack strong iconoclast feelings) over the period may have been important



A simple cross: example of iconoclast art in the Hagia Irene Church in Istanbul.



Byzantine Iconoclasm, Chludov Psalter, 9th century.^[1]

factors in both beginning and ending imperial support for iconoclasm. According to Arnold Toynbee, it is the prestige of Islamic military successes in the 7-8th centuries that motivated Byzantine Christians into evaluating and adopting the Islamic precept of the destruction of idolatric images.^[2]

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Background

The use of images had probably been increasing in the years leading up to the outbreak of iconoclasm. One notable change came in 695, when Justinian II put a full-faced image of Christ on the obverse of his gold coins. The effect on iconoclast opinion is unknown, but the change certainly caused Caliph Abd al-Malik to break permanently with his previous adoption of Byzantine coin types to start a purely Islamic coinage with lettering only.^[3] A letter by the patriarch Germanus written before 726 to two Iconoclast bishops says that "now whole towns and multitudes of people are in considerable agitation over this matter" but we have very little evidence as to the growth of the debate.^[4]

Theologically, the debate, as with most in Orthodox theology at the time, revolved around the two natures of Jesus. Iconoclasts believed that icons could not represent both the divine and the human natures of the Messiah at the same time, but separately. Because an icon which depicted Jesus as purely physical would be Nestorianism, and one which showed Him as both human and divine would not be able to do so without confusing the two natures into one mixed nature, which was Monophysitism, all icons were thus heretical. Reference was also made to the prohibitions on the worship of graven images in the Mosaic Law. However, no detailed writings setting out iconoclast arguments have survived; we have only brief quotations and references in the writings of the iconodules.

The first iconoclastic period: 730-787

Sometime between 726-730 the Byzantine Emperor Leo III the Isaurian ordered the

removal of an image of Christ prominently placed over the Chalke Gate, the ceremonial entrance to the Great Palace of Constantinople, and its replacement with a cross. Fearing that they intended sacrilege, some of those who were assigned to the task were murdered by a band of iconodules.^[5] Writings suggest that at least part of the reason for the removal may have been military reversals against the Muslims and the eruption of the volcanic island of Thera,^[6] which Leo possibly viewed as evidence of the Wrath of God brought on by over-the-top image veneration in the Church.^[7] Leo is said to have described mere image veneration as "a craft of idolatry." He apparently forbade the veneration of religious images in a 730 edict, which did not apply to other forms of art, including the image of the emperor, or religious symbols such as the cross. "He saw no need to consult the Church, and he appears to have been surprised by the depth of the popular opposition he encountered".^[8]

Germanus I of Constantinople, the iconodule Patriarch of Constantinople, either resigned or was deposed following the ban. Surviving letters Germanus wrote at the time say little of theology. According to Patricia Karlin-Hayter, what worried Germanus was that the ban of icons would prove that the Church had been in error for a long time and therefore play into the hands of Jews and Muslims.^[9] In the West, Pope Gregory III held two synods at Rome and condemned Leo's actions, and in response Leo confiscated papal estates in Calabria and Sicily, detaching them as well as Illyricum from Papal governance and placing them under the governance of the Patriarch of Constantinople^[10]. During this initial period, concern on both sides seems to have had little to do with theology and more with practical evidence and effects. Icon veneration was forbidden simply because Leo saw it as a violation of the biblical commandment forbidding the manufacture and veneration of images. There was initially no church council, and no prominent patriarchs or bishops called for the removal or destruction of icons. In the process of destroying or obscuring images, Leo "*confiscated valuable church plate, altar cloths, and reliquaries decorated with religious figures*",^[8] but took no severe action against the former patriarch or iconophile bishops.

Leo died in 740, but his ban on icons was confirmed and established as dogma under his son Constantine V (741-775), who summoned the Council of Hieria in 754 in which some 330 to 340 bishops participated to endorse the iconoclast position. No patriarchs or representatives of the five patriarchs were present: Constantinople was vacant while Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria were controlled by Saracens.



Icon of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (17th century, Novodevichy Convent, Moscow).

The iconoclast Council of Hieria was not the end of the matter, however. In this period complex theological arguments appeared, both for and against the use of icons. The monasteries were strongholds of icon veneration, and an underground network of iconodules was organized among monks. John of Damascus, a Syrian monk living outside of Byzantine territory, became the major opponent of iconoclasm through his theological writings. In a response recalling the later Protestant Reformation, Constantine moved against the monasteries, had relics thrown into the sea, and stopped the invocation of saints. Monks were apparently forced to parade in the Hippodrome, each hand-in-hand with a woman, in violation of their vows. In 765 Saint Stephen the Younger was killed, apparently a martyr to the Iconodule cause. A number of large monasteries in Constantinople were secularised, and many monks fled to areas beyond effective imperial control on the fringes of the Empire.^[3]

Constantine's son, Leo IV (775-80) was less rigorous, and for a time tried to mediate between the factions. Towards the end of his life, however, Leo took severe measures against images and would have banned his wife Irene, who was reputed to venerate icons in secret. He died before achieving this, and Irene took power as regent for her son, Constantine VI (780-97). With Irene's ascension as regent, the first Iconoclastic Period came to an end.

Irene initiated a new ecumenical council, ultimately called the Second Council of Nicaea, which first met in Constantinople in 786 but was disrupted by military units faithful to the iconoclast legacy. The council convened again at Nicaea in 787 and reversed the decrees of the previous iconoclast council held at Constantinople and Hieria, and appropriated its title as Seventh Ecumenical Council. Thus there were two councils called the "Seventh Ecumenical Council," the first supporting iconoclasm, the second supporting icon veneration and negating the first. Unlike the iconoclast council, the iconodule council included papal representatives, and its decrees were approved by the papacy. The Eastern Orthodox Church considers it to be the last genuine ecumenical council. Icon veneration lasted through the reign of Empress Irene's successor, Nicephorus I (reigned 802-811), and the two brief reigns after his.

Byzantine iconoclasm also had consequences in Western Europe. Charlemagne himself attempted to follow the iconoclastic precepts of the East Roman Emperor Leo Syrus, but this was stopped by Pope Hadrian I.^[2]

The second iconoclastic period: 814-842

Emperor Leo V the Armenian instituted a second period of Iconoclasm in 815, again possibly motivated by military failures seen as indicators of divine displeasure. The Byzantines had suffered a series of humiliating defeats at the hands of the Bulgarian Khan Krum, in the course of which emperor Nikephoros I had been killed in battle and emperor Michael I Rangabe had been forced to abdicate.^[11] In June of 813, a month before the coronation of Leo V, a group of soldiers broke into the imperial mausoleum in the Church of the Holy Apostles, opened the sarcophagus of Constantine V, and implored him to return and save the empire.^[12]

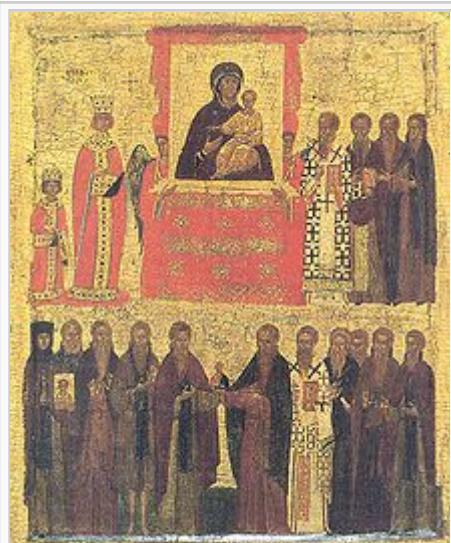
Soon after his accession, Leo V began to discuss the possibility of reviving iconoclasm with a variety of people, including priests, monks, and members of the senate. He is reported to have remarked to a group of advisors that

all the emperors, who took up images and venerated them, met their death either in revolt or in war; but those who did not venerate images all died a natural death, remained in power until they died, and were then laid to rest with all honors in the imperial mausoleum in the Church of the Holy Apostles.^[13]

Leo next appointed a "commission" of monks "to look into the old books" and reach a decision on the veneration of images. They soon discovered the acts of the Iconoclastic Synod of 754.^[14] A first debate followed between Leo's supporters and the clerics who continued to advocate the veneration of icons, the latter group being led by the Patriarch Nikephoros, which led to no resolution. However, Leo had apparently become convinced by this point of the correctness of the iconoclastic position, and had the icon of the Chalke gate once more replaced with a cross.^[15] In 815 the revival of iconoclasm was rendered official by a Synod held in the Hagia Sophia.

Leo was succeeded by Michael II, who in an 824 letter to the Carolingian emperor Louis the Pious lamented the appearance of image veneration in the church and such practices as making icons baptismal godfathers to infants. He confirmed the decrees of the Iconoclast Council of 754.

Michael was succeeded by his son, Theophilus. Theophilus died leaving his wife Theodora regent for his minor heir, Michael III. Like Irene 50 years before her, Theodora mobilized the iconodules and proclaimed the restoration of icons in 843, on the condition that Theophilus not be condemned. Since that time the first Sunday of Great Lent has been celebrated in the Orthodox Church as the feast of the "Triumph of



Late 14th-early 15th century icon illustrating the "Triumph of Orthodoxy" under the Byzantine empress Theodora over iconoclasm in 843.
(National Icon Collection 18, British Museum)

Orthodoxy".

Issues in Byzantine Iconoclasm



This page of the Iconodule Chludov Psalter, illustrates the line "They gave me gall to eat; and when I was thirsty they gave me vinegar to drink" with a picture of a soldier offering Christ vinegar on a sponge attached to a pole. Below is a picture of the last Iconoclast Patriarch of Constantinople, John VII rubbing out a painting of Christ with a similar sponge attached to a pole. John is caricatured, here as on other pages, with untidy straight hair sticking out in all directions, which was meant to portray him as wild and barbaric.

What accounts of iconoclast arguments remain are largely found in quotations or summaries in iconodule writings. Many arguments derived from scripture re-occur in Protestant writings on the same issue. Debate seems to have centred on the validity of the depiction of Jesus, and the validity of images of other figures followed on from this for both sides. It should be noted that iconoclasts do not seem to have followed much Muslim thinking in banning secular figurative art; a large religious mural in an Imperial building in Constantinople was removed and replaced with hunting scenes. The main points of the iconoclastic argument were:

1. Iconoclasm condemned the making of any lifeless image (e.g. painting or statue) that was intended to represent Jesus or one of the saints. The Epitome of the Definition of the Iconoclastic Conciliabulum held in 754 declared:

"Supported by the Holy Scriptures and the Fathers, we declare unanimously, in the name of the Holy Trinity, that there shall be rejected and removed and cursed one of the Christian Church every likeness which is made out of any material and colour whatever by the evil art of painters.... If anyone ventures to represent the divine image (*χαρακτήρ, charakter*) of the Word after the Incarnation with material colours, let him be anathema! If anyone shall endeavour to represent the forms of the Saints in lifeless pictures with material colours which are of no value (for this notion is vain and introduced by the devil), and does not rather represent their virtues as living images in himself, let him be anathema!"

2. For iconoclasts, the only real religious image must be an exact likeness of the prototype -of the same substance- which they considered impossible, seeing wood and paint as empty of spirit and life. Thus for iconoclasts the only true (and permitted) "icon" of Jesus was the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ, according to Catholic doctrine.
3. Any true image of Jesus must be able to represent both his divine nature (which is impossible because it cannot be seen nor encompassed) and his human nature (which is possible). But by making an icon of Jesus, one is separating his human and divine natures, since only the human can be depicted (separating the natures was considered nestorianism), or else confusing the human and divine natures, considering them one (union of the human and divine natures was considered monophysitism).
4. Icon use for religious purposes was viewed as an innovation in the Church, a Satanic misleading of Christians to return to pagan practice.



Nikephoros I upholding an icon and trampling John VII of Constantinople. Chludov Psalter.

"Satan misled men, so that they worshipped the creature instead of the Creator. The Law of Moses and the Prophets cooperated to remove this ruin...But the previously mentioned demiurge of evil...gradually brought back idolatry under the appearance of Christianity."^[16]

It was also seen as a departure from ancient church tradition, of which there was a written record opposing religious images, though mostly in the context of paganism.

The chief theological opponents of iconoclasm were the monks Mansur (John of Damascus), who, living in Muslim territory as advisor to the Caliph of Damascus, was far enough away from the Byzantine emperor to evade retribution, and Theodore the Studite, abbot of the Stoudios monastery in Constantinople.

John declared that he did not venerate matter, "but rather the creator of matter." However he also declared, "But I also venerate the matter through which salvation came to me, as if filled with divine energy and grace." He includes in this latter category the ink in which the gospels were written as well as the paint of images, the wood of the Cross, and the body and blood of Jesus.

The iconodule response to iconoclasm included:

1. Assertion that the biblical commandment forbidding images of God had been superseded by the incarnation of Jesus, who, being the second person of the Trinity, is God incarnate in visible matter. Therefore, they were not depicting the invisible God, but God as He appeared in the flesh. They were able to adduce the issue of the incarnation in their favor, whereas the iconoclasts had used the issue of the incarnation against them. They also pointed to other Old testament evidence: God instructed Moses to make two golden statues of cherubim on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant according to Exodus 25:18-22 (<http://bibref.hebtools.com/?book=%20Exodus&verse=25:18-22&src=NKJV>) , and God also told Moses to embroider the curtain which separated the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle tent with cherubim Exodus 26:31 (<http://bibref.hebtools.com/?book=%20Exodus&verse=26:31&src=NKJV>) .
2. Further, in their view idols depicted persons without substance or reality while icons depicted real persons. Essentially the argument was "all religious images not of our faith are idols; all images of our faith are icons to be venerated." This was considered comparable to the Old Testament practice of only offering burnt sacrifices to God, and not to any other gods.
3. Regarding the written tradition opposing the making and veneration of images, they asserted that icons were part of unrecorded oral tradition (*parádosis*, sanctioned in Orthodoxy as authoritative in doctrine by reference to Basil the Great, etc.), and pointed to patristic writings approving of icons, such as those of Asterius of Amasia, who was quoted twice in the record of the Second Council of Nicaea. What would have been useful evidence from modern art history as to the use of images in Early Christian art was unavailable to iconodules at the time.

4. Much was made of acheiropoieti, icons believed to be of divine origin, and miracles associated with icons. Both Christ and the Theotokos were believed in strong traditions to have sat on different occasions for their portraits to be painted.
5. Iconodules further argued that decisions such as whether icons ought to be venerated were properly made by the church assembled in council, not imposed on the church by an emperor. Thus the argument also involved the issue of the proper relationship between church and state. Related to this was the observation that it was foolish to deny to God the same honor that was freely given to the human emperor.

Emperors had always intervened in ecclesiastical matters since the time of Constantine I. As Cyril Mango writes,

"The legacy of Nicaea, the first universal council of the Church, was to bind the emperor to something that was not his concern, namely the definition and imposition of orthodoxy, if need be by force"^[9]

That practice continued from beginning to end of the Iconoclastic controversy and beyond, with some emperors enforcing iconoclasm, and two empresses regent enforcing the re-establishment of icon veneration. One distinction between the iconoclastic emperors and Constantine I is that the latter did not dictate the conclusion of the First Council of Nicaea before summoning it, whereas Leo III began enforcing a policy of iconoclasm more than twenty years before the Council of Hieria would endorse it.

Sources

A thorough understanding of the Iconoclastic Period in Byzantium is complicated by the fact that most of the surviving sources were written by the ultimate victors in the controversy, the iconodules. It is thus difficult to obtain a complete, objective, balanced, and reliably accurate account of events and various aspects of the controversy.^[17]

Major historical sources for the period include the chronicles of Theophanes the Confessor^[18] and the Patriarch Nikephoros,^[19] both of whom were ardent iconodules. Many historians have also drawn on hagiography, most notably the *Life of St. Stephen the Younger*,^[20] which includes a detailed, but highly biased, account of persecutions during the reign of Constantine V. No account of the period in question written by an iconoclast has been preserved, although certain saints' lives do seem to preserve elements of the iconoclast worldview.^[21]

Major theological sources include the writings of John of Damascus,^[22] Theodore the Studite,^[23] and the Patriarch Nikephoros, all of them iconodules. The theological arguments of the iconoclasts survive only in the form of selective quotations embedded in iconodule documents, most notably the Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea and the *Antirrhetics* of Nikephoros.^[24]

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See also

- Aniconism
- Libri Carolini
- Sunday of Orthodoxy

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