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Byzantine Art

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Iconoclasm

If increased control was at the centre of much of the policy of the state and church in this period, the outcome is perhaps predictable—a reactive period with new tensions. Repercussions could be expected. Was the growing power of the established and institutionalized church to be neutralized by these measures or, on the contrary, given more potential power? Similarly, was the alternative society of independent monasteries and charismatic hermits confined or enhanced in its status by these rulings? Would decisions about the uses of art channel it into certain functions, or would they confirm art's value and increase its importance as a means of public statement? Was the desire for authoritarian control on the part of emperors a sign of perceived threat from within the empire or was its purpose to promote solidarity in the face of the enemy?²⁰

The Quinisext Council, in addressing some questions about art, succeeded in putting art firmly on the theological agenda. The next church council (the local council that took place in the palace of Hieria at Chalcedon near Constantinople in 754) focused on the allowable functions of religious art. So did its successor, the Seventh Council of Nicaea in 787, coming to diametrically opposed conclusions. Nicaea was repudiated by the local council of 815 in St Sophia, which turned the tables again and reaffirmed the decisions of Hieria. Finally, the period comes to an end in 843 with the Constantinopolitan Synod of 843 which upheld Nicaea as the Seventh Oecumenical Council and celebrated the Triumph of Orthodoxy as recorded in the British Museum icon [13].

Much of the eighth century and first half of the ninth century were intellectually dominated by iconoclasm, or icon destruction. While this was not the only crisis of the period—the Arab threat to Constantinople and the Byzantine empire was acute in the first half of the eighth century—yet the politicization of religious art impinged upon every area of thought and action. The art historian can point to empirical evidence of the destruction of images in the period, both in the centre of Constantinople, in the Patriarchal Palace of St Sophia [52], and elsewhere; and there is negative evidence of other destruction, such as the lack of any further mention of the *Kamouliana* icon of Christ. The church councils gave the legal evidence of a state-led policy on art, alternately by the iconoclasts, who denied the holiness of icons and rejected icon veneration, and by the iconophiles, or iconodoules, the ‘slaves of icons’, who defended icon production and icon veneration. The theological debate centred on the holiness of icons, the relation between icon and model, and the theoretical implications of representing Christ in human form. The polarity between icon destroyers and icon lovers was pursued as a battle to the death between heresy and orthodoxy. The key stage was the formulation of the Council of Hieria, summoned in 754 by the iconoclast emperor Constantine V (741–75). Although later iconophiles ensured that all its decrees were excised from the record, its required refutation at Nicaea in 787 ensures that we can deduce the main line of reasoning. The argument was christological: an icon of Christ either depicted his humanity alone, or both his humanity and divinity, and so either separated his human nature from his divine one or confused the two—both already anathematized heretical positions. The neat solution was to be that the eucharist was the only true representation of Christ. This meant that all manufactured icons of Christ were to be proscribed, in keeping with the second commandment of God given to Moses: ‘You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth’ (Exodus 20: 4). The justification of iconoclasm at this council was that it succeeded in solving the problem of idolatry by eliminating the objects that provoked it. The response to this was given at the Council of Nicaea in 787, summoned by Empress Eirene, who was regent for Constantine VI from 780 to 797, and empress from 797 to 802, and Patriarch Tarasios. It decreed that Christ’s historic incarnation not only legitimated his visible representation in paint, but also demanded it. The veneration (*proskynesis*) given to icons was allowable, and it was not idolatry; absolute worship (*latreia*) was given to God alone. Although an icon contained a figural image, it was only the model of this image to which veneration was directed. These two councils polarized the arguments, and the later iconoclast council of 815 and iconophile synod of 843 had little to do except to confirm one or the other.

The timetable given by the councils covers a period of fanatical dispute and strife, which was not to be resolved on either side by argument alone. Since the whole history of the church, from the earliest apologetics, indicates different and extreme convictions about the use of images, it suggests that allegiance to one side or the other depends less on logic and more on emotional and spiritual factors. At certain periods, places of worship do not contain figural images, notably in the first 200 years of Christianity (or so it appears), in Byzantium during iconoclasm, and in parts of Europe during the Reformation. At other periods, certain individuals or groups may be committed opponents of images, imagining them as idols. This long-term situation makes it difficult to explain the precise reasons for the open outbreak of Byzantine iconoclasm in the eighth century, even if the events and stated positions were fully and clearly recorded. In the event, the failure of the iconoclasts was met with the systematic destruction of their books, the character-assassination of their careers, and the conscious (or unconscious) rewriting of history. Modern assessments of the period may, therefore, suffer from even greater bias than the medieval sources, since they may accept or reject what can be read or reconstructed on the basis of their own personal attitudes to the issues. If concepts of 'rationalism' or 'superstition' are seen as a factor in medieval attitudes, then the potential for modern prejudice abounds. But what is communicated by all our sources in common is the high emotion of the protagonists, whose genuine belief in their (incompatible) positions cannot be doubted.

The art-historical study of iconoclasm has special problems, not the least being fewer objects and more primary texts than in other periods. The difficulty of assessing texts containing anti-iconoclastic narratives and rhetoric cannot be overstated, as they are not simply repositories of information. A text widely quoted in studies of the period, as it appears to offer a clear account of the treatment of the decoration of the *Milion* during iconoclasm, may serve as an example of the problems inherent in its analysis. This is the life of the iconophile martyr, St Stephen the Younger of Constantinople (c.713–65) [50], who was said to have been tortured and finally executed for refusing to accept the decisions of the Council of Hieria.²¹ Whether or not St Stephen was in fact the most outstanding monk who fought for the icons in the eighth century, as his biography claimed, its success meant that from the ninth century no one in Byzantium doubted this. The passage documents an event of iconoclasm as follows:

The tyrant [Emperor Constantine V] left the palace and proceeded to that part of the great street called the *Milion*. In that monument, since ancient times and since emperors have reigned with Christian piety, the six holy Oecumenical Councils have been represented and openly displayed, proclaiming the Orthodox faith to peasants, foreigners and the public. It is here