

Iconoclasm in Byzantium: myths and realities¹

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Byzantine iconoclasm has been wrapped in an almost impenetrable membrane of attitudes and assumptions, many of them conflicting. But it has been increasingly recognised – and demonstrated – that the Byzantines were as adept at ‘spin’ as modern politicians are frequently accused of being, so that Byzantine writings on iconoclasm might therefore be seen as a particularly problematic body of primary sources. Indeed, when we come to re-examine the texts involved, and place them clearly in their historical context, it rapidly becomes apparent that very little of what has been assumed about the iconoclast debate is in fact reliable.

The context for the iconoclast controversy is provided by the political and economic crisis which afflicted the eastern Roman empire following the Arab invasions of the 630s onwards and the collapse of Roman power in the east Mediterranean basin. The need to codify and delimit the parameters of what was now possible and thinkable is apparent in texts from the 650s onwards and in the attempts of the church to deal with shifting perceptions and explanations of the ways the world was changing. Religious images and portraits had existed long before Christianity, and continued into the Christian era. But the fusion of sacred portraits with the real presence of saintly personages – a linkage accepted for relics from the later fourth century – occurred only shortly before the first stirring of the iconoclast movement in the early 8th century, and iconoclasm responded to this, pulling together a wide set of apparently different issues into the same ideological package. Whether or not images had initially been at the heart of these concerns, this new conceptual construct was able to absorb them.

The obvious question to ask is why did iconoclasm occur at this particular time? And I would argue that the answer has to do – as scholars have argued for decades, but, I would suggest, for the wrong reasons – with the Byzantine response to Islam. On one level, Iconoclasm was about positioning images within the cult of saints: of allowing images of the holy to perform like relics of the holy. To say that a saint’s bone, or a bit of cloth or oil that once touched a saint or the saint’s bones, conveyed saintly presence was a major step in itself; to extend that power to an object physically unconnected to the saint in anyway – the portrait painted by human hands – did indeed smack to many of idolatry, and was condemned as such by early churchmen. Images of pre-Christian gods and goddesses had to be long forgotten as real actors before the sacred portrait could first be admitted into the company of the holy through the medium of miraculous images not made by human hands, a shift which only occurred in the mid-sixth century.

These relic-images were agents of conversion, providers of revenue for their owners, and protectors of cities and the state. Sacred portraits made by human hands, however, are only rarely –

¹ This short paper is based on the analyses in L. Brubaker and J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the iconoclast period: a history* (Cambridge, forthcoming), where all the relevant evidence and literature can be found.

and usually problematically – ascribed any such miraculous powers before the last quarter of the seventh century, after which the church responded with the first canonical legislation concerning religious imagery at a council held in Constantinople in 692; a generation later, in the 720s, various churchmen condemned the holy portraits, and, ultimately, iconoclasm was officially declared in 754 (there is not a jot of evidence for an iconoclast edict issued by Leo III in the 720s, and virtually none for Leo III himself being an iconoclast). The critical issue is why sacred portraits became widely accepted as a means of accessing the divine, comparable to relics, around the year 680. Was the response of the church, as embodied in the canons of the council of 692, a reaction to a change in the way images were perceived, or were there other issues in addition? And, given the reaction against sacred portraits from some churchmen, followed across the next generation by the church at large in the eastern empire, and ask whether iconoclasm was primarily a theological debate, or did it have wider significance?

Before 680, and the acts of the council held in Constantinople in that year, there are scattered references to images that suggest that occasionally, and in certain circumstances, particular sacred portraits were venerated and accorded the power to protect their owners or to transmit prayers. But there is no evidence that the practice was widespread until then, after which we have a steadily mounting flurry of references. Why was 680 the point from which a qualitative shift in attitudes to images can be detected?

The seventh century was a traumatic period for the East Roman empire. The first twenty five or so years were marked by Persian and Avar invasions, culminating in the siege of Constantinople of 626, when the relic-icon of Christ was famously credited with saving the city. Though the Constantinopolitan repulse of the siege basically ended the Avar threat, the Persians continued to occupy the empire's military attention for another year, until the emperor Herakleios defeated them, and recovered the True Cross, in 627-628. But seven years later Syria and Palestine were in the hands of a new rival, the Arabs, and following the battle of the Yarmuk in 636 the Arab conquests permanently, as it turned out, deprived the empire of its eastern provinces. By 642 the empire had lost its richest province, Egypt. By 650, it had lost over half of its territory and an even greater proportion of the state's fiscal revenue and, with few financial or military resources in reserve and its infrastructure severely shaken, was low in morale. All of this meant that the seventh century witnessed a decisive shift in Byzantine social, political and cultural interests. The impact of these events was accentuated, and rhetorically overshadowed, by the heresy (in Byzantine eyes) of the instigators of these problems, Islam.

It is impossible for us to recover the real nature of the political-military and the ideological threat that Islam presented to Byzantines at this time, although we can measure its impact to a certain extent in texts. And these effects can be summed up in a few words – fear and anxiety, and most particularly fear about the relationship between correct practice and orthodox belief: right action and observance, correct belief – orthodoxy - wins divine support. Wrong practice and false understanding loses it, indeed brings divine punishment. Issues of what was orthodox and what was not, what would bring divine support or lose it, were of fundamental existential significance to many people. The texts

are theological, and so this determines the form in which these fears were presented: inevitably, the Arab invasions were seen as God's punishment for the sins of the chosen people.

This is context which informs how we approach the problem of the emergence of holy portraits as a means to access divine presence around the year 680. The shift in the way sacred portraits were received in Byzantium was a product of late-seventh-century insecurities. God was punishing the Byzantines, and the Arabs were the major instrument of that punishment. The state, the church, and the individual orthodox believer, all in a state of spiritual anxiety, were only too ready to admit new channels of access to divinity. Relics worked, but they were not infinitely reproducible, and images-not-made-by-human-hand were even rarer. But the shift from miraculous images to portraits painted by living people – eventually justified by new ways of thinking about the relationship between the painter and the painted – solved this problem just as the problem of the limited human remains of saints had been solved centuries before by contact relics, by almost limitless multiplication. The critical issue is the transference from physical presence to representation.

I will not pursue the complex arguments adduced by either those who were opposed to the use of imagery in this way or their opponents, which would take us into deeper waters than we have time to navigate in this short paper. Instead, having outlined some of the context for the beginnings of the controversy, and why the second half of the seventh century was a fertile ground for the increase in the production and use of images, I want now to turn to the way that controversy was represented by those involved in it and by later generations. For two very well-established motifs dominate virtually every discussion of the subject. The first is that the iconoclasts actively destroyed sacred imagery; the second is that there was a popular and at times large-scale opposition to iconoclasm, and that iconoclasm, as an imperially-sponsored dogma, had to be forced onto an unwilling and recalcitrant population whose natural piety led them to defend images.

The first of these two assumptions, often asserted, can be falsified relatively easily, simply by amassing and examining all the evidence which purportedly supports it. In the end, it amounts to virtually nothing – the occasional over-zealous application of imperial policy by an eager provincial commander or Constantinopolitan churchman is the most that we actually find. The stories of atrocities against both holy images and against those who defended them are largely confections of the ninth century, and in particular of a monastic milieu which made it its business to rewrite the preceding century or so according to its own lights, and with its own political and theological agenda.

I want to look at the second assumption in more detail. The reign of Constantine V represents for the iconophile propagandists of the later eighth and ninth centuries the high-point of persecution, destruction of images and so forth. Yet the evidence to support this view is extremely slim. Thus, contrary to popular assumptions both in later Byzantine sources and in modern historiography, the rebel Artavasdos does not, in fact, appear to have 'restored' images after he had chased the young emperor Constantine V out of the capital city in 742, and there is no reliable evidence at all for his

religious ideological views. The first sermon of John of Damascus, which may date to the late 740s, refers to divisions within the church, but also makes the point that the majority within the church has already adopted the new position. The majority of bishops in the church clearly supported, however indifferently, the decisions reached at the synod of 754, while several of those re-admitted to the church during the council of 787 were actively involved in promoting iconoclasm. The general picture of a relative apathy among the majority of the population at all levels is reinforced by evidence from the reigns of Constantine VI and Eirene, from 780 onwards. There is nothing to suggest that right up to the first sessions of the council of 787 the majority of bishops in the church were not entirely favourable to the established policies. A re-examination of the background and reign of Eirene, credited as a great iconophile and, of course, as the instigator of the council which re-admitted images to the church, in fact suggests that she belonged to the great majority of those who had no strong views on the topic of icons, or who kept their views to themselves. Only after the abdication of the patriarch Paul in 784 and the appointment of Tarasios, a member of the metropolitan élite, do her policies as regent suggest a different perspective. Eirene appears in fact to have taken the opportunity offered by Paul's abdication (which, according to one tradition, may have involved his expressing regret about the schism between Constantinople and the other patriarchates) in order to re-integrate Constantinople into the wider church – indeed her foreign policy with regard to the papacy and the Frankish empire, and the planned marriage alliance with the Frankish royal family, would argue for a greater concern with her political position and the security of her son's rule than anything else.

It is interesting that the patriarch Nikephoros notes in two texts, the third *Antirrheticus* and the *Apologeticus major*, that 'most people' had not taken into account the fact that the iconoclasts were evil and ignorant people. These remarks, written in the first 20 years of the ninth century, are particularly significant, for they give the impression that not many people had a close familiarity with the nature of iconoclast ideas and those who supported them. Indeed, we learn from these texts that Nikephoros' experience of the iconoclasts, at least in the context in which he writes, is confined largely to the metropolitan area rather than the provinces – we should recall that Nikephoros was himself the son of an imperial official – an *asekretis* – and had in his turn been recruited into the palace administration. But we also see that Nikephoros' objections are to ignorance and impiety in general, and that he is most disturbed by the participation of the poor in political affairs and by the pastimes and occupations through which they could be characterised, or rather, caricatured. As others have pointed out, the same elements in urban society were no doubt also to be found on the 'other' side, and that it was their social position and mores as much as their actual beliefs which inspired Nikephoros' contempt.

Of those individuals who can certainly be described as iconoclasts little is known in detail. The families of many members of the upper reaches of society maintained often highly successful careers under the iconoclast emperors, in particular Constantine V: the parents of Theophanes the confessor were wealthy landowners, and the father held a senior military position during Constantine's reign until his death in 763. Both Theodore of Stoudion (a candidate for the patriarchal throne in 806, we should recall) and his uncle Plato of Sakkoudion came from a wealthy and privileged family, whose relatives occupied a range of powerful posts in the government financial administration, and similar considerations apply to the families of the patriarch Tarasios, as well as those of Makarios of Pelekete,

Euthymios of Sardis and Hilarion of Dalmatos. There is no evidence that Plato ever opposed iconoclasm, and indeed he supported the patriarch Tarasios' efforts to reconcile the predominantly hostile monastic groups to a compromise position. The vast majority of all the bishops in the empire went along with or actively supported imperial iconoclasm from the very beginnings, and many of them made important theological contributions to the debate. All the bishops at the council of 787 began the first session, nominally, as iconoclasts. The bishops of the Balkan dioceses as well as those of the eastern provinces accepted publicly during the council of 787 that they had been born and brought up under iconoclasm and knew nothing else. One of the complaints of the iconophile monks at the council of 787, and one of the major bones of contention between the 'moderate' position adopted by Tarasios and Eirene, on the one hand, and the 'hard-line' monks on the other, was that bishops who had changed sides were being allowed to recant and to stay in their positions.

There is no evidence to suggest, therefore, that the social elite of the empire was in any way openly hostile to imperial iconoclasm. And quite apart from these are the numerous leading civil and military officers, who supported Leo III, Constantine V and Leo IV during their reigns and continued in office after the death of each ruler, drawn from the provincial and metropolitan élites. It has long been recognised that there were no obvious or lasting factions within the army either for or against iconoclast policies. What limited evidence there is suggests that continued loyalty to the government at Constantinople was the norm – the regional administration at Naples remained firm in its support of the Constantinople régime, for example, even where its bishops were appointed by Rome and where friendly relations between the *doux* of Naples and the popes were maintained, thus throughout the period from Hiereia in 754 until the mid-760s. Loyalty to the emperor himself and to his successors or family was paramount. During the second period of iconoclasm, from 815 until the mid-820s, the letters of Theodore of Stoudion refer to a number of individual men and women, some senior state officials, many private persons, who offered succour and refuge or other support to members of the monastic community who had been imprisoned or exiled, some of whom had themselves suffered exile or confiscation of their property for their support of the iconophile view. But by the same token he writes to or mentions many who accepted the imperial policy, implying that they were by far the greater number, including the majority of senior ecclesiastical and monastic leaders. Theodore mentions a certain acquaintance of his, Sergios, the *hypatos* of the *aerikon*, a senior fiscal official, who had sided with the iconoclasts; he refers in another letter to a *strategos* and *patrikios* whom he warns, through his wife, to remain orthodox at heart even if he must behave differently in public; while there are several cases of officials who accepted imperial policy under Leo V but returned to the iconophile position after his death in 820. He also suggests that many did so out of fear rather than conviction, although it is difficult to know to what extent this was actually the case. As perhaps with most of the government and court, iconoclasm was a convenient vehicle for the public expression of that loyalty. On the whole, Theodore's letters give the impression that the support rendered to those who voiced their opposition to imperial iconoclasm was from people who preferred to keep their views to themselves, who may even have been unconcerned or perhaps neutral in respect of the theological

rights and wrongs of the case, but who objected to the ways in which the government went about imposing its views and punishing those who objected.

While no obvious organised opposition to iconoclasm in secular society or the church can be reliably identified, convinced and committed iconoclasts are equally hard to find: the emperor Constantine V, and a few of his closest supporters and dependents, such as Michael Lachanodrakon, for example, accused in the iconophile literature of such outrageous persecutions of monks and nuns, among others. Yet Michael was a loyal general under Leo IV and Eirene and Constantine VI, even after the council of 787 and the formal establishment of a theologically much more explicit 'cult' of images than had ever existed before. Did he publicly renounce his views? Or was he never in fact as profoundly iconoclast in his beliefs and actions as the later tradition would have us believe? It is difficult to say, but the contradiction between his supposed earlier beliefs and those of the government of Eirene and Constantine after 787 would cast some doubt on such claims.

By the same token, the political role of monks in opposing imperial iconoclasm, much emphasized in the iconophile literature, is open to serious question, although there can be no doubt of the influence of certain individuals. Theodore of Stoudion, has left in his letters a vivid testimony to his activities and the role he played in influencing both the humble and the great men of his time. Here again, however, we may be misled by Theodore's estimate of his own importance. When the emperor(s) turned against him, Theodore struggled in vain to obtain the secular (and even the monastic) support he needed to redeem his situation and that of his immediate supporters. He had a wide and, apparently, effective range of friends in high places – yet they were unwilling to expose themselves too obviously when imperial authority was at issue.

It would appear that both support for and opposition to iconoclasm depended very much on closeness to the court and the emperors themselves. It reflected, in other words, the degree of dependency of those who were willing to support iconoclast notions upon the emperors and their court. But why did individuals or groups oppose or publicly object to iconoclasm? Until now, it has generally been seen as a question of conscience - those who opposed imperial policy did so because they had a particular view of, or understanding of, sacred images, and they saw iconoclast ideas as a fundamental challenge to their understanding of orthodox belief. But other motives may have been at play. After all, if many of those who were most loyal to imperial policy acted as they did because of their relationship to the emperors, might it not be equally true that those who opposed imperial policy were also motivated by reasons other than the purely theological?

A partial confirmation of this assumption is the fact that one of the most fiercely critical groups was that led by the Stoudion monastery during the period immediately preceding, as well as during and following, the council of Nicaea in 787. Yet the monastic establishment was split into at least three factions during and after the council of 787. It is clear from the evidence of the acts of 787 that the great majority of monks who attended the council were from regions near to the capital. The 132 monastic signatories accompanied ten abbots, who are named after the second session as those of six monasteries in Constantinople, two in Bithynia, one from Nicaea and one of unknown location. That this bias towards the metropolitan region is simply a reflection of difficulties of travel and

communication seems unlikely, in view of the number of distant bishops as well as representatives of other patriarchates who were present. That it represents both the density and concentration of monastic houses within the empire at this period is more probable, and it is therefore not surprising that these communities, some of whom had indeed suffered at the hands of the imperial government, for whatever reason, would wish to be represented at such an important meeting. It might also have reflected the interest of monastic communities in the issues to be debated, however, and in addition the nature of the invitations to attend the council issued by the patriarch Tarasios himself. As we have seen, the chief aims of those monks who attended the council appear to have focused on personal animosities as much as on issues of principle.

This may well be explained less in terms of religious politics in the strict sense, therefore, than in terms of wider political, social and cultural politics. The monasteries of Constantinople and Bithynia were largely the preserve of the well-educated offspring of relatively well-off families from Constantinople and its hinterland. Plato of Sakkoudion and his nephew Theodore are obvious examples, and many of the leading figures of monastic houses in the region during the period from ca. 790-840 were from similar backgrounds. This was by no means a new phenomenon: there had existed a close relationship between wealthy founders and patrons of monastic foundations, along with their abbots and leading members, and the social élite of the capital and its hinterland, from the sixth century and before.

Is it not possible, therefore, that taking up the monastic vocation, and more importantly, achieving a position of authority and leadership in metropolitan monastic circles, was also one way of facilitating real influence upon, or opposition to, imperial policy? For whereas officials in the army or palace, dependent ultimately for rank, function and position upon the emperor, were entirely bound to support imperial policy, and could offer little opposition (or could not hope to get away with it, as the plots of 765-766 illustrate), monastic communities had a greater degree of freedom. It is certainly very clear from the council of 787 that the monks had no intention of sitting quietly until matters were resolved; yet although they had an overtly 'political' agenda, insofar as they wanted the question of readmission of iconoclast bishops to be at the top of the list for discussion, they were tolerated by Eirene (even though she excluded them from the final meeting in the Magnaura.), perhaps because they had dissolved into factions, which could easily be separated and dealt with - as indeed events, as steered by Tarasios, demonstrated.

During the period of the second iconoclasm, it was a small number of monks who once again attracted the limelight in respect of opposition, while the great majority of bishops once more sided with the emperor. And once again, while there are some very well-known examples of iconophile monks from areas outside the metropolitan hinterland, the great majority of those who appear most clearly in the sources to represent the opposition come from the regions nearest to Constantinople or the city itself, represented chiefly by Theodore of Stoudion and his uncle Plato, who had close connections within the secular élite establishment. Theodore's network of friends and monks is dominated in his letters by those of his own community and monasteries in Bithynia.

There is, in fact, little evidence of any monastic opposition to iconoclasm until the issue was raised by the empress Eirene and by Tarasios. If we assume, as we believe it is reasonable to do, that

there was no such opposition to Constantine V (opposition there was, but it can be shown to be political and not associated with the issue of images), it appears that monastic opposition to iconoclasm was an entirely opportunistic attempt on the part of certain monks, led by Sabas of Stoudion, to obtain a tactical advantage, both over Tarasios (whose appointment as patriarch Sabas appears to have objected to), on the one hand, as well as over other monastic circles with influence, on the other hand - perhaps those led by Plato of Sakkoudion, for example, who certainly acted as an adviser to Tarasios during the council, and later advised on Tarasios' successor. In the atmosphere generated by the council of 787, and in the context of the imperially-sponsored cult of images which now developed, it would have paid other monks to develop a similar position, so that the rapid development of, and retrospective attribution to the monks of, a committed anti-iconoclast politics, becomes very understandable in the context of the times.

There remains no really convincing evidence, therefore, that there was any particular group explicitly opposed to imperial iconoclasm until the months preceding the holding of the abortive council of 786 and the more successful gathering of 787; although there is every reason to think that there were a number of committed iconoclasts among the higher clergy. Only when it became clear that the emperors' own position was no longer favourable to iconoclasm did their resolve fade, and the acts of 787 show that the great majority of iconoclasts was very rapidly persuaded to adopt the new orthodoxy which Eirene and Constantine VI preferred. Iconoclasm was and remained throughout its history an entirely imperial phenomenon, therefore, with few roots in popular opinion and with only the vested interests of those dependent upon the emperor or unreflectively loyal to the ruler (although this must often have been the great majority) as the basis for its continued existence. Yet as long as it remained the official policy of the government and of the emperors chosen by God it retained the loyalty of the great majority of the empire's subjects.

The second period of iconoclasm does offer a slightly different picture. Leo V re-imposed a policy hostile to the display and honouring of sacred images because of the simple assumption of a relationship between iconoclasm and political and military success. Iconoclasm, it was clearly thought, must be orthodox, because when the empire was iconoclast it was successful in these regards. But by this time the evolving self-image of the monks as the defenders of orthodoxy was growing into an important motif in the re-writing of the history of the eighth century. Monks - or at least, some of them - do appear as heroes of the resistance to this heretical position. Yet their numbers were in fact remarkably limited, led by Theodore of Stoudion until his death, but with few real opponents thereafter. Under Theophilos, for example, men such as Ioannikios remained entirely passive in this respect, as far as their hagiographies and other written sources inform us. Even Theophilos' persecution produced few victims, mostly not imperial subjects. And what is also interesting to note in this period is that while a handful of senior ecclesiastical officials objected to the emperor's plans, there is very little evidence of any substantial opposition from the majority - as Theodore of Stoudion himself notes, former generations had certainly not felt that rejecting the adoration shown to images and images themselves was heretical; while many otherwise orthodox believers did not find such rejection either wrong or problematic. Those who were punished by the emperor were accused of

political crimes. The metropolitan of Nicaea, Ignatios, was in this respect probably typical of the vast majority of churchmen, accepting imperial policy and changing his position as the official position changed. He must mirror the actions and attitudes of the great majority of clergy in both periods of iconoclasm. In the secular world, the great majority of government officials, soldiers and administrators simply accepted the imperial commands as formulated and presented at the council of 815, and we may reasonably assume for similar reasons: in part because they accepted the ideological position adopted by the emperor, in part because it was convenient or necessary, from the point of view of career and position, to do so.

Theodore's correspondence suggests that the whole Constantinopolitan clergy along with nearly all the monasteries of the city adopted the imperial position. The leading churchmen in many provinces - Bithynia, Thessaly, Lydia, Cherson, Phrygia, Isauria and the Aegean islands, as well as in southern Italy - accepted or even promoted the iconoclast position. The *oikonomos* of the Hagia Sophia, for example, a certain Theodoros Krithinos, acted as imperial ambassador to the Franks in 824 and 827, accompanied by other senior churchmen and imperial officials loyal to the emperor, eventually being appointed to the archbishopric of Syracuse. Contemporary hagiographies suggest similarly that Leo's iconoclasm met with widespread and general acceptance. Perhaps especially significant is the fact that many monasteries conformed with imperial policy, too, so that there was no 'monastic' opposition of the sort which it was later (and perhaps even already in the early ninth century) believed had taken place in the eighth century. Indeed, John the Grammarian's own community, the monastery of Sergios and Bakkhos, functioned as a focus for the spreading of iconoclast ideas, to the extent that recalcitrant iconodules were sent there for 're-education'. Even monks in the Stoudion monastery accepted the imperial position and were rewarded accordingly. And the various monastic establishments at Constantinople associated with the family of Philaretos, well-endowed and supported in the reigns of iconoclast rulers, certainly conformed with imperial policy, and had at a later date radically to re-present themselves and re-fashion their histories in the light of the changed circumstances. Leo V and Michael II were more interested in getting everyone to take communion together than in what they wanted to do with regard to sacred images in private. From the imperial perspective, this was an issue of imperial authority and legitimacy, as much as, if not much more than, an issue of theology and dogma.

On the basis of the evidence we actually have, therefore, rather than the myths generated by the iconophiles of the ninth century, it would be difficult to see iconoclasm as an issue which split the empire from top to bottom. It was certainly an issue, and it certainly aroused passionate responses. Many people had undoubtedly accepted that images were a means of access to the divine; those who saw this use of holy portraits as a problem just as genuinely believed that this was a form of idolatry that had brought the wrath of God down on the Romans. But the people who understood the complex theology which gradually evolved across the eighth century and which underlay the two positions were really very few in number. Iconoclasm, promoted initially by an emperor who really believed that the volcano and eruption on the island of Thera in 726 was an act of God warning the Romans that their sins – in particular, as understood by contemporaries, the sin of idolatry – were to be punished, was an

instrument of imperial politics, intended to save the empire, deriving its strength from the common-sense convictions of certain emperors and their advisers, and accepted by the vast majority of the empire's subjects because it was convenient to do so (and dangerous not to do so). Yet the fact that Tarasios and Eirene felt that they could succeed in what was, in fact, the relatively dangerous enterprise of totally reversing over thirty years of official imperial policy, suggests that there must have been enough general apathy in key circles or resentment at the imperial position, for them to risk a challenge to the established policy. Indeed, apart from one or two, probably isolated, examples, we have no real knowledge of the extent to which any sort of serious iconoclast policy was imposed in the provinces, except through the preaching of the clergy (for example, Theodore of Stoudion's reference to the enthusiasm of the metropolitan of Smyrna). And in view of the lack of any evidence to substantiate the later iconophile claims about the nature of the popular opposition to imperial iconoclasm, we can only conclude that iconoclasm was, for the great majority of the population of the Byzantine world in the eighth and early ninth century, either irrelevant or unimportant to the way they practised their faith. In this respect, it may perhaps usefully be compared with the imperial monotheletism of the reign of Constans II. And this means that we need radically to re-write the social and political history of the empire in the eighth and ninth centuries.

Some further reading

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