

Two crises resolved. The case of Byzantine iconography

Prof. Elena Ene Draghici-Vasilescu, University of Oxford

Abstract:

In the eighth and the ninth centuries AD the art of the Byzantine Empire underwent two major crises in what is known as the iconoclastic controversy. One of them is conventionally agreed as having taken place between 726 and 787, and one between 814 and 843 (I say ‘conventionally’ because, as any process, these crises became manifest gradually). Both crises were resolved during the reign of two empresses, who most of their lives were on the throne as sole rulers: Irene of Athens (Empress in 768-803; sole ruler from 797) and Theodora II (Empress 830-856; sole ruler from 842). They managed to alleviate the effects of decisions against the use of icons taken by previous sovereigns. Through good choices of advisers at court and by the employment of diplomatic skills when dealing with the neighbouring states, Irene and Theodora ensured long reigns for themselves. After declaring the use of icons legitimate again they took measures to safeguard their endurance. The illustrated presentation will elaborate on these issues.

Introduction

Iconoclasm, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, is the action of “attacking or assertively rejecting established beliefs” as well as institutions, values, and practices. It is also the doctrine expressed by iconoclasts. Iconoclastic movements happened throughout the human history for religious and/or political motives in various places and historical periods – famously in England during the reign of Henry the VIII. **Byzantine** iconoclasm is equally known.

The ‘history’ of Byzantine iconoclast. The arguments used in the controversy over the use of religious images

The **Byzantine Iconoclasm** (Greek: Εικονομαχία, Latinized: *Eikonomachía*, lit. ‘the struggle for images’ or, in the Byzantine context, ‘the war on icons’) consisted in debates and sometimes physical clashes which took place between *iconoclasts* (those who opposed the use of images within churches and public places) and *iconolaters* (those who supported the display of religious images as well as their deployment in the Liturgy); the latter are more known as *iconodules* or *iconophiles*. The theological justification of the iconoclastic movement was the interpretation of one of the Ten Commandments within the Old Testament: that which forbids the making and worshipping of “graven images” (stated in Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 5:8); some concepts within the New Testament could and have been interpreted in the same light. Some researchers maintain that Byzantine iconoclasts were also against the idea that saints had

an intercessory role, as well as against the use of relics in Church.¹ However there is no consensus that the iconoclasts in Byzantium upheld the latest two views. The inhabitants of the Byzantine Empire called the controversy over the images *iconomachy* and did not use the terms *iconoclasts* and *iconodules*. Only from the seventeenth century – so, from the modern era– these began to be employed.

Obviously, the movement (the iconoclasm) represented a crisis in the development of Byzantine ideology and art. It underwent two main stages and both were resolved by two women leaders: the Empresses Irene and Theodora II, who reinstated the icons in 787, respectively 843.

The iconoclast crises resolved mainly by the Empresses Irene and Theodora, who reinstated the icons

iii. 1. The ‘first iconoclasm’ and Empress Irene of Athens Sarantapechaina (c. 752–803; ruled 768-803)

The Byzantine iconoclasm is conventionally being thought to have started with a Decree against images issued in 730 by Emperor Leo III the Isaurian (c. 675- 741; emperor 717–741). Fig. 1 represents what a scribe (illuminator) fathomed that happened before the Decree was issued.



Fig. 1. Argument about icons before the emperor, in the *BNE MSS Graecus, Vitr. 26-2 Codex Graecus Matritensis Ioannis Skylitzes/Skylitzis Chronicle*; fol. 50v; produced in Sicily in the twelfth century (1100-1200).² Public Domain; file: Argument about icons before the emperor in the Madrid Skylitzes2.png

¹ See, for instance, Michael Humphreys, “Introduction: Contexts, Controversies, and Developing Perspectives”, in M. Humphreys (ed.) *A Companion to Byzantine Iconoclasm*, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition. vol. 99. Leiden and Boston: Brill Publishers, 2021, pp. 1–106; doi:10.1163/9789004462007_002. ISBN 978-90-04-46200-7. ISSN 1871-6377.

² The *Madrid Skylitzes* (*BNE shelfmark MSS Graecus Vitr. 26–2*) is a twelfth-century illustrated version of John Skylitzes’ chronicle *Σύνοψις Ἱστοριῶν/Synopsis Historion/the Synopsis of Histories*. Skylitzes lived between early 1040s and after 1101. The manuscript of the *Synopsis of Histories* he left covers the reigns of the Byzantine emperors from the death of Nicephorus I in 811 to the deposition of Michael IV in 1057. The *Madrid Skylitzes* is the only surviving illustrated manuscript of a Greek chronicle. It was produced in Norman Sicily in the twelfth century (1100-1200). At the Biblioteca Nacional de España in Madrid, where it is today, it is known, as shown above, as *Codex Graecus Matritensis Ioannis Skylitzes*. Other names for it are *Skyllitzes Matritensis* and *Madrid Skylitzes*. It includes 574 miniature paintings, which includes depictions of everyday life in the Byzantine Empire such as boats, literary practices, sieges and ceremonies. It is unclear whether these illustrations are copies of earlier Byzantine images or were newly created specifically for this copy.

Some texts maintain that the process began in 726, but as is the case with any ideological undertaking, one cannot pinpoint a precise beginning, hence both dates may be considered correct with respect to the beginning of the ‘first iconoclasm’ (as it is sometimes called) in Byzantium. The Decree had as an immediate consequence the departure of Patriarch Germanus I (c. 634-c. 732; in the See 715-730) from Constantinople. We have here, in fig. 2 an iconographic rendering of that episode.



Fig. 2. Patriarch Germanos I of Constantinople with icons supported by angels; the middle of the eighteenth century. The most prominent is the icon of Virgin and child. Source: Public Domain, File:Liddskaja.jpg

Then the supporters of images were persecuted and religious images destroyed on a large scale. The artists of the time represented that moment thus, fig. 3a, b.



Fig. 3a. A scene of Byzantine Iconoclasm as reflected MS D.129 (GIM 86795 – Chludov/ Khudov Psalter, in Moscow, State Historical Museum of Russia, ninth century. Facsimile edition

It was written in the wake of the final defeat of Iconoclasm (843) in the Monastery of St John the Studite or the Imperial Church of Hagia Sophia.

Vasiliki Tsamakda attributed the paintings to 7 artists: 4 Italians, an Englishman or Frenchman and two Byzantines. If those attributions are correct, the manuscript represents a very unusual collaboration of artists from different nations. It is unclear whether the miniatures are copies of Byzantine images or original to the manuscript. See Vasiliki Tsamakda, *The Illustrated Chronicles of Ioannes Skylitzes in Madrid*, Leiden: Alexandros Press, 2002.

Fig. 3b. Soldiers deface or demolish an iconodule church on the orders of the iconoclast emperor Constantine V Copronymus (741–775); *Manasses Chronicle*, Sofia, Bulgarian manuscript; miniature from the fourteenth Source: a scan from the book Ivan Duichev, *Miniatures from the Manasses Chronicle*, Bulgarski hudojnik, Publishing house, Sofia, 1962.

Leo's anti-images policy was continued by his successors: Constantine V [718 –775; emperor 741–775]; Leo IV the Khazar (750–780; emperor 775–780), and Constantine VI (771 – before 805; emperor with Irene as regent in 780–790; co-ruler with Irene 792–797). Then Irene's rule followed – she was on the throne in various capacities between 768 and 803, as I will show.

Even though her husband, Leo IV the Khazar from the Isaurian (Syrian) dynasty, was an iconoclast, Empress Irene of Athens Sarantapechaina (c. 752–803; on the throne 768-803) had iconophile sympathies. She was Empress with her husband between 768 and 780, then regent during the childhood of their son Constantine VI 780 -790; co-ruler in 792–797; and then empress ruling in her own rights and sole ruler of the Eastern Roman Empire from 797-802). We have here visual representation of Irene realized in various places and diverse media (figs. 4; 5a, b; 6).



Fig. 4. Empress Irene; image from the Pala d'Oro in Venice. As known, Pala d'Oro was made in Constantinople, but finished after the Fourth Crusade in Venice (the lower part of the piece was made in Venice).



Fig. 5 a, b. Typical representations contemporary to us of Irene in Byzantium



Fig. 6. The representation of Irene on a Byzantine *solidus* she issued. Coin from the eight- ninth century produced in Constantinople, today in the British Museum. Here Irene is identified as empress (βασιλισσῆ) rather than emperor (βασιλεύς). She was the empress who was instrumental in restoring the use of icons in the Eastern Roman Empire. Source: Classical Numismatic Group at [CNG-Ancient Greek, Roman, British Coins \(cngcoins.com\)](http://cngcoins.com). On the reverse of this coin is the portrait of Constantine IV, Irene's son.

In 787, during her rule as regent, Irene initiated the Second Council of Nicaea, which condemned iconoclasm and brought an end to the first iconoclast period (730–787). By doing that she became the first Byzantine leader to restore the cult of icons. Some of Irene's activities towards that decision follow: on the death of her husband in September 780, she became the guardian of their 10-year-old son, Constantine VI, and co-emperor with him. In the same year the empress discovered and prevented what seems to have been a plot organized by the iconoclasts to put Leo's half-brother, Nicephorus, on the throne. In 784 she had her supporter and former secretary, Tarasius/Tarasios I (c. 730–806; in the See 784–806), installed as Patriarch of Constantinople. Then she summoned two church councils on the subject of images/icons; the first one (the only intended) on the 17th of August 786 within the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. But it was interrupted by soldiers belonging to the iconoclast party. Therefore, another council was necessary; this assembled on the 24th September 787 at Nicaea. It numbered about 350 participants, including representatives of

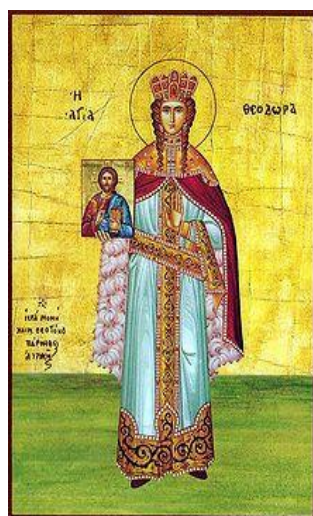
Pope Adrian I, and restored the cult of images. This is the council that was recognized by both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches and is known as the Seventh Ecumenical Council. (For the Byzantines this was the Second Council of Nicaea; the first in that city took place in May 325 and dealt with the Arian debate in the East).

iii. 2. The ‘second iconoclasm’ and Empress Theodora II the Armenian

The ‘second iconoclasm’ ensued after 27 years; it took place between 814 and 843. The Empress that solved the second part of the iconoclasts controversy in the Empire was Theodora II, known also as Theodora the Armenian (c. 815–c. 867; ruled 842–856). She is called ‘The Second’ because the other Theodora, Justinian’s wife, is Theodora I. Theodora II is represented here in figs. 7, 8, 9.



Fig. 7. Empress Theodora as depicted in the *BNE MSS Græcus, Vitr. 26-2 Codex Græcus Matritensis Ioannis Skylitzes*, fol. 51r; Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid; produced in Sicily in the twelfth century. Source: Public Domain; file:Theodora in the Madrid Skylitzes2.png; Fig. 7 6b. Empress Theodora; icon from the second half of the nineteenth century; unknown author. Source: Public Domain; File:Theodora (Greek icon, nineteenth century).jpg



8. Empress Theodora; icon from the second part nineteenth century; unknown author. Source: Public Domain; File:Theodora (Greek icon, nineteenth century).jpg



Fig. 9. Solidus representing empress Theodora (on the obverse) and her children Thekla and Michael III (on the reverse). Solidus (Gold, 20 mm, 4.18 g, 6 h), Constantinople, 842-843 (867?). The coin, despite being struck during the regency of Theodora, represented her on the obverse as a sole ruler. The inscription accompanying her image says 'ΘΕΟΔΩΡΑ ΔΕΣΡΒΝ'Α'. The obverse of the coin shows: facing half-length bust of Theodora, crowned and wearing a loros, holding a globus cruciger (the orb and cross) in her right hand and a staff with a cross in the left hand. On the reverse the following is shown: the inscription 'ΜΙΧΑΗΛ ΣΘΕΚΛΑ', and a facing half-length bust of Michael III, wearing a loros crowned and, holding a cross in his right hand. Facing half-length the bust of Thekla is rendered She wears a crown surmounted by cross and wearing chlamys, holding globus cruciger in his right hand. DOC 1d. SB 1686.

This coin struck during the regency of Theodora shows how Michael was less prominent than his mother, who is represented as sole ruler on the obverse, and even less than his sister Thekla, who is also depicted on the reverse.

Theodora II was married to the Byzantine Emperor Theophilus (813-842; ruled 829-842). Theophilus's father, Michael II (770-829; 820-829), was the founder of the Amorian dynasty. He was an iconoclast who, among other cruelty acts, punished the iconophile Bishop Euthymius of Sardeis in 824; the scene is rendered in fig. 10.



Fig. 10. The torture and martyrdom of the iconophile Bishop Euthymius of Sardeis by the iconoclast Byzantine Emperor Michael II in 824, in *BNE MSS Græcus, Vitr. 26-2 Codex Græcus Matritensis Ioannis Skylitzes*, fol. 28v; produced in Sicily in the twelfth century (1100-1200)

Michael II (770-829; ruled 820-829) was an iconoclast, but had a phase in his life when he tried to keep at peace with the iconophiles on the advice of Theodore the Studite (759-826). The scholar tried to persuade him to allow icons, but that did not happen during Michael's lifetime. His son Theophilus (813-842; reigned 829-842), was also an iconoclast (he was the last

Emperor to support iconoclasm); in that he was supported by Patriarch John VII ‘the Grammarian’ (?– 867; in the See 837–843). But Theophilus married Theodora, who was an iconophile. The literature in the field of Byzantine culture has not decided yet if he know about his wife views on images.

The story of Theodora’s success in reinstating the cult of icons, similar to a great extent, to that of Irene of Athens, is thus: after Theophilus chose her through an open process of selection via a bride-show (organized by his step-mother, Euphrosyne), she was crowned empress on 5 June 830. When the Emperor died, Theodora became regent for their minor heir (at Theophilus’s request on his death-bed). Though only in her late twenties, the Empress proved to be fully capable of governing the empire: she led well and inspired loyalty, surrounded herself with experienced officials, and had no obvious rivals. Despite the loss of most of Sicily to the Fatimid Arabs³ and the failure to retake Crete from the Umayyad Arabs,⁴ Theodora’s foreign policy was otherwise highly successful; by 856, the Byzantine Empire gained the upper hand over both Bulgaria and the Abbasid Caliphate. Also the Slavic tribes in the Peloponnese were forced to pay tribute. The Empress achieved all of these without decreasing the imperial gold reserve. Concerning the internal policy, among other positive decisions she took, after more destructions to churches and the decoration took place, Theodora stopped it and initiated the process of reinstating the images/icons in Church and other public places. But that on the condition that Theophilus will not be posthumously condemned by the Church for his iconoclasm. Thus, in 843, like Irene 50 years before her, Theodora brought an end to the second wave of Byzantine iconoclasm, thus formalizing another victory for a Byzantine Empress. Since 843, the first Sunday before Lent, Theodora’s decision of 843 is celebrated as the ‘Triumph of Orthodoxy’. The feast has been represented in the iconography of the Empire thus; fig. 11:



Fig. 10. The icon representing ‘The Triumph of Orthodoxy’ under the Byzantine empress Theodora, 843; late fourteenth-early fifteenth century (National Icon Collection, no.18 [1988,0411.1], British Museum (since 1988). Pigment and gold on wood-panel. The dimensions of the icon are: height: 37.8 cm, width: 31.4 cm, depth: 5.3 cm. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1988-0411-1#; Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

³ Sicily was under the Emirate of Sicily from 831 to 1091, when the Normans conquered it.

⁴ Crete was under the Emirate of Crete from 820s to 961, when it was retaken by the Byzantines.

We have to agree that the coincidences within the lives and the achievements of the two Byzantine female rulers who took decisions that led to the existence of the rich iconography which we still see today are remarkable.

Selective bibliography

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