Introduction

There has been a welcome tendency in the fields of medieval and especially of Mediterranean history in recent years to cross boundaries, to link very different areas and cultures, and to remind us of 'the big picture' – we need only mention the work of McCormick, Horden and Purcell, and Wickham, to illustrate this point.[1] Such works, combining both original research and synthesis, present the reader not simply with a vast wealth of material from both the archaeological as well as the written record about the areas concerned – in all three cases here, for example, the territories of the former Roman world clustered around their Mediterranean heartland – they offer a context for understanding, and an interpretation of that context. The evolving history of different post-Roman societies and cultures has been set in its physical context, the means and forms of communication and transport have been analysed, and the development of new forms of social and economic organisation has been outlined. The period between 400 and 900 CE has always been especially intractable because the evidence is so complex and fragmentary, permitting such a variety of interpretations from so many different perspectives that a common understanding or agreement on the basic shape of change has been almost impossible to arrive at. But by adopting a regionally comparative approach, by focusing on a series of specific themes applicable to the post-Roman world from the Atlantic across to the Syrian desert and from the North Sea to the Sahara, historians have been able to establish a framework, a solid foundation for analysis and for understanding the social and economic structures of the formations which succeeded the Roman world.

Yet many problems remain specific to the different regions and sub-regions taken in by this broader approach, and this volume is aimed at pulling back from the long-range view, to look in detail at the evolution and dynamic of medieval east Roman, or Byzantine, society in a period which presents very particular problems and questions for the historian. It is generally agreed that the period stretching from the beginning of the eighth century, and more particularly from the reign of Leo III (717–41) up to the

[1] McCormick 2001, Horden and Purcell 2000, Wickham 2005.

end of the reign of Theophilos (829–42), was one of enormous change in the Byzantine or east Roman world, a period during which social, political, economic, and ideological forms which were still recognisably rooted in their late Roman antecedents were immutably transformed and moulded into what we would now describe, with hindsight, as medieval and 'Byzantine' structures of belief, representation, and social and political organisation. This process did not begin with Leo III, for the equally momentous transformations of the preceding century, during which the rise of Islam, the loss of the eastern provinces and the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate on the one hand, and the loss of imperial control over the Balkans, on the other, radically re-drew the political and cultural map of the east Mediterranean region. These changes set the context for, and nurtured the roots of, the events of the eighth century.[2] But it was the introduction of an imperial policy of iconoclasm in respect of religious images, or of what was later so called (the Byzantines called it iconomachy – the struggle about images – which is a more appropriate term for what actually happened), which has attracted the attention of historians of Byzantine culture, as well as theologians. It is important to remember that this interest is not necessarily a detached historical fascination with the dynamics of cultural and political upheaval, although that is certainly part of the picture. For iconoclasm itself inspired a particularly fierce response from those who later opposed it, and it was they – the eventual victors – who wrote, or perhaps re-imagined, the history of the period according to their own lights and their own political-theological programme. As we shall see in the discussion that follows, this has particular implications for the interpretation of the literary sources.

There exists a vast secondary literature on all aspects of the 'iconoclast' period (and, following conventional usage, we shall continue to use the terms iconoclasm, iconoclast, and iconophile, though the first term, as noted earlier, is anachronistic, and the second was normally used only – at least in the preserved and pro-image sources – as a pejorative label), and some of this is represented in the bibliographies and footnotes of this volume. But there exists also a problem, insofar as it is iconoclasm itself which has generally occupied centre stage in the discussion, even where issues such as the military or fiscal organisation of the empire are at stake. While this has been recognised in several recent publications, it has often meant that matters which do not reflect directly historians' interests in iconoclasm as a political, ideological or theological issue have been rather neglected. In this book, we will attempt to situate iconoclasm in a wider

[2] For some background material, see Haldon 1997.

cultural and social/institutional context, without denying its fundamental role in determining the modes of political and social discourse as they later evolved both within the Byzantine world and in later historiography and theology. So much will be apparent from the chapter headings.

The sources for the history of this period are many and complex. In an earlier volume we introduced and surveyed the major documentary and non-documentary sources, including the evidence of material culture.[3] Since that volume appeared the situation has improved further with the appearance of more modern critical editions of certain key texts, the increase in the availability of the results of archaeological excavations, and a constant stream of books and articles on one aspect or another of the period or the sources. In the present volume we refer the reader to our survey of the sources, but note that where appropriate more recent editions or literature pertaining to them have been incorporated into the apparatus.

The period from the later seventh to the middle of the ninth century saw a series of major changes in both the internal structure as well as the external situation of the eastern Roman or Byzantine empire. It also saw fundamental shifts in social relations and the economy of the state as the emperor and ruling circles struggled with the transformed economic situation and the constant threats posed by enemies from without. No aspect of life went unchanged – the relationship of town to countryside, of provinces to Constantinople, of landlord to tenant and imperial official to emperor, all were affected in different ways, in ways which together generated what is recognisably a medieval rather than a late antique world. Values changed, modes of expression changed, ideas of how images were to be perceived and understood changed, along with the social and ideational structures which people inhabited and reproduced in the course of their day-to-day lives. Traditionally, and as we have noted above, most of these shifts and changes have been interpreted through the prism of iconoclasm, predominantly as understood by contemporary or near-contemporary writers and commentators, whether in histories or hagiographies, letters or acts of church councils. In recent years, some effort has been made to re-establish a balance, to suggest that, important though iconoclasm may have been to some, both during and after the reigns of those emperors who promoted it, it represented just one aspect of east Roman culture and society. More importantly, it has been suggested that it did not impact with such force upon so many aspects of east Roman life as many orthodox apologists

[3] Brubaker and Haldon 2001.

later suggested. Imperial foreign policy, the military and fiscal administration of the empire, the production of food and other resources and their distribution and consumption through government agency or commercial exchange, these represent structures, practices, and ways of living which were untouched by iconoclasm in its narrower ideological sense. Of course, the perceived results of iconoclasm – on coins and seals, in church furniture and decoration, in the public use and display of various forms of imagery, in attitudes towards particular emperors and their activities or achievements – were apparent and impacted on ordinary experience; and it is difficult to disentangle causally the relationship between perception and praxis (that is to say, the structured and contextualised social activities of individuals as members of groups) in sociological terms. Nevertheless, there is still a prevailing assumption that the most important thing that happened in Byzantium in the eighth century was 'iconoclasm', and in this volume we set out, not to remove iconoclasm from the picture, but to try to place it in a broader context and to integrate it – having first tried to determine what sort of political, cultural, and ideological qualities it possesses – into a broader context in which it can be permitted to play a full role causally, yet also be seen for what it was: a fully 'social' phenomenon. In this framework, we hope to show that 'iconoclasm' in fact consisted of a series of strands which interacted with different results at different points across the eighth and ninth centuries, as well as to give iconoclasm the recognition it deserves as both symptomatic of these broader changes and at the same time as itself a stimulant to shifts in perception, developments in theology, and changes in social praxis.

At the very beginning of our period – the 660s – the east Roman empire was in crisis, fighting without pause for its continued political survival, forced to come to terms with a dramatically changed world in comparison with the previous century. Its resources were massively reduced, its population was declining, its territory was constantly threatened or actually slighted, its economy was disrupted, its army was unable to prevent hostile raiders and the enslavement of some of the emperor's subjects, and its fiscal apparatus was in disarray. By the end of our period, and while it had expanded only very slightly in territorial terms, it was, quite simply, 'safe' again: no major power threatened its existence, no neighbouring state had the resources or the ideological wherewithal to destroy it, in spite of the apparent success of the Bulgars under Krum in the early ninth century, and no outside power challenged its territorial integrity on more than a sporadic and short-lived basis. Its financial administration ran smoothly and effectively, it had evolved a logistical infrastructure

capable of supporting an effective defensive strategy, its frontiers were stable, and commerce and exchange were beginning once again to flourish. Much of this is, of course, accepted and has been understood for many years. But the processes through which these transformations occurred remain for the most part obscure, and the connections between the different elements which make up this complex picture unexamined or unclear. We have tried, therefore, to present the course of Byzantine history in terms of the totality of changes, but at the same time to disentangle the different threads which make up the complex pattern of the social, cultural, political, and institutional history of Byzantium in these centuries.

The iconoclast controversy, in purely ideological terms a conflict over the appropriateness or not of venerating icons or holy images, nevertheless threw up a whole series of questions about Byzantine identity and its Roman heritage which produced, in the ninth century, a reclamation of the 'classical' past in a highly inflected late ancient form, shaping the orthodox Byzantine identity thereafter and influencing the evolution of the orthodox church and Greek culture up to the present day. Iconoclasm was a complex of factors whose roots lay well before the eighth century, among them a weakening of imperial authority as a result of political and military failures in the period *c.* 630–700; the concomitant growth of a debate about the efficacy of divine intervention in human affairs and the vested power of relics, saints' cults and, derivatively, of holy images; the related question of free will as opposed to divine foresight; the dependence of the emperors on a narrow clique of military and civil officials; and the local roots – which reflected also local beliefs and fears – of the former field armies in the provinces and around Constantinople. These different elements combined to produce a variety of responses to the need to define the boundaries between orthodox and heterodox, between what would bring peace, stability, and military success to the empire, and what had been the cause of defeat and humiliation, seen, of course, as a punishment visited upon God's Chosen People for their sins.

The first 'iconoclast' response to this came from churchmen in the 720s, during the reign of Leo III, but Leo's son and successor Constantine V (741–75) – probably encouraged by what was seen as a further divine chastisement and warning (the outbreak of a severe bout of plague in Constantinople in the late 740s) – in 754 convoked a council – intended to be ecumenical – to pronounce on the issue of the role and value of images, and to distance the church and orthodoxy from the dangers of idolatry. There is no reliable evidence of mass popular opposition to these moves, nor indeed of massive persecutions (except where political repression in Constantinople, and of small groups of high-ranking persons, can be

plausibly shown to be associated with plots and attempted *coups d'état*). Indeed even the reputation of the empress Eirene, the supposedly iconophile ruler who temporarily re-introduced images in 787, has been effectively challenged. Rather than a devoted supporter of a cult of sacred images, she appears in fact to have been an opportunist, and the results of her convening the Council of 787 at Nicaea were both the reconciliation of 'iconoclast' clergy (clearly a majority) with the new imperially led policy, and the establishment, for the first time, of an official cult of images. It is thus ironic that the first phase of iconoclasm in effect inspired – or at least codified – a cult of images which had hardly existed before. In contrast to the iconoclasm of the eighth-century emperors, which represented a serious effort to come to grips with major ideological and political anxieties, the iconoclasm espoused by Leo V, following his successful usurpation in 815, was motivated by somewhat simpler motives: the reigns of Leo III (by now, whatever his original beliefs, firmly associated with the inauguration of iconoclasm) and Constantine V in particular were associated with military success and victory. Iconoclasm, it was felt, was the foundation for such success, and its re-establishment would bring to the imperial armies victory once more, after a series of major defeats at the hands of both Bulgars and Arabs. In the event, and with one or two exceptions, military defeats were more frequent than victories, and the arguments used by the iconoclast emperors could be turned against them. Official imperial iconoclasm faded away without resistance after the death of the emperor Theophilos in 842, although the threat of its revival and the supposed continued existence of iconoclasts at the heart of the empire continued to play a central role in the internal politics of court and empire until the later ninth century.

Our aim in this volume is to re-examine these themes, to interrogate the assumptions made by older as well as more recent historians in the light of what we understand from the sources – written, archaeological, representational – and to draw some conclusions about the structure, dynamic, and shape of Byzantine society across the two centuries with which we are concerned. At the same time, we hope to show how the different elements of this complex picture are articulated and to demonstrate the key causal relationships which led to change and transformation.

Historical studies come in many different forms and each has its own agenda. This is very much an effort to come to grips with diverse and often problematic source materials in order to elucidate the very specific developments within one early medieval social and cultural formation. Issues which might be relevant in a different context – theoretical problems of state formation or the economy, for example, or eighth- and

ninth-century artistic 'style' – remain untouched or implicit, except insofar as they impinge on particular issues of interpretation in the appropriate chapters. Given the scope of the volume and the disparity of both primary source material and modern literature, we cannot hope that every reader will find our interpretation persuasive. But we do hope that we have succeeded at least in establishing a baseline from which further work can proceed.

When we originally planned this book – many years ago – we envisaged a single volume which would incorporate both a discussion of the complex and problematic source material and an analysis of that material in respect of our interpretation of the period *c.* 680–843. The dates implicit in our period, generally designated as the period of iconoclasm (but which the Byzantines more appropriately called iconomachy – the struggle about, rather than the destruction of, images), coincide very approximately with the beginning of the reign of Leo III in 717 and the end of the reign of Theophilos in 842, but in fact, and in order properly to contextualise the argument, we have extended our discussion back, well into the seventh century. We felt this was appropriate because we wanted to challenge or at least modify several of the assumptions currently made about this 'background' period, the better to highlight some of the points we wished to make about the eighth and ninth centuries.

Writing a book together proved an educational experience – we did not wish to produce a volume which consisted of a series of chapters connected by a common theme but written by two different scholars. Rather, we hope to have merged our different perceptions and ideas about all aspects of the period, and thus to have produced a volume which brings together a much broader range of specialist knowledge and interests than might be the case with a standard single-author monograph. To this end it should be stated that, although readers will undoubtedly wish to associate certain themes and topics with a certain author, we have read, amended, and interpolated ideas into each other's words throughout. Our aim was to integrate our ideas for each area we have addressed, and in particular to harmonise the very different sources, as well as the subjects they inform, as seamlessly as possible in a single interpretative effort.

This volume presents the results of our research into both the sources and the issues of the period *c.* 650–850. It blends original work unpublished before now with a synthesis of the results of our own work and that of colleagues, in order to generate a general picture of the development and major characteristics of east Roman society across those centuries. Inevitably, there will be more attention paid to some aspects than to others, but we have tried nevertheless to paint a picture which will serve to demonstrate the state of

our current understanding of this fascinating and complex period as well as to generate new questions, challenge old assumptions, and encourage further work in the fields we touch upon. The extent to which we have succeeded or not in our endeavour we leave to the judgement of our readers.

Leslie Brubaker, Birmingham
John Haldon, Princeton

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1 Belief, ideology, and practice in a changing world

The context and background

The eighth and ninth centuries represent a formative period for east Roman civilisation and culture. They witnessed not only the political recovery of the late Roman state from the devastation of the second half of the seventh century, but the restructuring of the state's institutional basis, the final stages in the evolution of eastern orthodox Christian theology and dogma, the development of a new social and political elite, the transformation of the forms of urban life and economy as well as urban-rural relations, and the generation of a new, 'medieval' perspective and understanding of the past. It is this last feature, and the implications it holds for our understanding and appreciation of the literature of the period, which has underlain modern attempts to grapple with the nature of these phenomena, and which has also served in many ways to mislead us in our efforts to engage with and appreciate this newly medieval world.

The iconoclast controversy, as it is known in modern scholarship, is only one of a number of elements relevant to the evolution of Byzantine culture and society in the eighth and ninth centuries. Nevertheless, it has attracted an inordinate degree of attention for the simple reason that the ninth-century 'victors' in the conflict moulded the historical perception of their past in such a way as to make it the dominant issue for later generations of Byzantines, and in consequence for modern historians, who are dependent in the first instance on the impression they gather from their written documents of what was significant or important for the people who inhabited the cultural world they study. We will by default, therefore, need to devote some considerable space to the issue, if only to demonstrate why it needs to be re-evaluated and put more firmly into its context.

In many respects the question of why Leo III may have adopted the attitude he did towards holy images is less difficult to answer than that of how the initial stages of the debate over images developed. For the context of Leo III's views and actions is to be found to a great extent in the events of the previous 100 or so years, a period of major social and ideological adjustment as well as disruption; and it is the long-term trends and developments in east

Roman society, culture, and politics which provide the essential framework within which the events of Leo's reign can best be understood. But as we shall also see, Leo III was not really an 'iconoclast' in the sense which the word has come to bear both in the modern literature as well as in the iconophile propaganda of the later eighth and ninth centuries.

This is not to suggest that the answer is either simple or easily arrived at, nor that Leo's own role and personality should be ignored, for there were a great number of separate developments which contributed to the complex picture of what happened in east Roman society during this period. Attitudes to sacred images in general, and the role they played, or were thought to play, in Christian beliefs, represent one element, of course, the importance of which is clear from the name that the Byzantines gave to the conflict – iconomachy (the 'image struggle'). But, beyond this, beliefs about what constituted the holy in general, and about how the holy was hierarchically arranged, are significant components of any picture of the eighth and ninth centuries, as are responses to sacred presence as represented by relics. So, too, are attitudes towards the occupants of the imperial throne during the second half of the seventh century; and the ways in which the emperors themselves, and their court, had promoted a particular view of the imperial office during the later sixth and seventh century. Then there is the changing nature of the relationship between Constantinople and the provinces, in particular as between the capital and imperial government, on the one hand, and its armies on the other. Equally, the role of towns and urban communities, and the ways in which subjects of the emperors conceived of their society and the position occupied by towns and cities in it, played a role. East Roman conceptions of the relationship between individuals and God, and between the Roman state and God, also played a fundamental part; as did attitudes towards the alien or heterogeneous in Roman society – whether heretic, Jew or Muslim, all presented a threat to the Roman polity – which occupied an increasingly significant place in people's day-to-day beliefs and understanding. It is, we would argue, the complex interaction between all these elements that provides the ground in which the seeds of imperial iconoclasm were sown. In particular, it can be argued that the relationship between individuals and the holy was redefined at the same time as that between individuals and their ruler. As Christian hegemony in the east Mediterranean crumbled, tensions between the need to maintain order and the need to access belief meant that conduits linking men and women to God became ever more tightly circumscribed even as, paradoxically, additional channels to God were opened. People at all levels of society were evidently uneasy about the mismatch between the promises of orthodox ideology and