Introduction

Iconoclasm — *eikonomachia* for the Byzantines — was the name given to the stance of that portion of Eastern Christianity that rejected worshipping God through images (*eikones*) representing Christ, the Virgin or the saints. By imperial imposition, this was the official doctrine of the Byzantine Empire between 726 and 843, in two clearly differentiated stages separated by a period of iconoduly, or veneration of icons, between 787 and 815. It was declared a heretical dogma by several Councils and therefore one that should be persecuted, including by the Second Council of Nicaea (787). Defenders of icons vigorously opposed iconoclasm and its supporters in a process of identity construction that would irrevocably mark Byzantine society. Much of this opposition found support in literature, producing texts that told the story from the authors’ own point of view. The substantial impact on the mindset of the age meant that subsequent generations continued to speak and write about the iconoclast controversy, with the inevitable consequence of rewriting recent history, often in a premeditated fashion.

Some initial caveats should be noted. This is not a book about iconoclasm per se, or about its theological or dogmatic dimensions, but about its social, political and ecclesiastical repercussions. In short, its topic is literature, the texts referring to the crisis that were written during the years of the iconoclastic controversy and its defeat. In recent decades, there has been a great deal of productive research into the Middle Byzantine era and the iconoclast conflict. But modern scholarship has downgraded the real impact of iconoclasm in shaping everyday experience and the economic landscape of eighth- and ninth-century Byzantium, by suggesting that the

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1 For the terminology currently used, cf. Bremmer 2008.
2 Karlin-Hayter 1993; Criscuolo 1994b; Auzépy 2004a; Odorico 2014.
most significant role of the controversy regarding images was to trigger social and literary debate. The relevance of such debates was in fact routinely overemphasised by extant Byzantine sources. Modern studies illustrate how, why and by what means the veneration of images was persecuted. But the study of the literary production of this age, which resulted in a set of intriguing texts composed during a time of instability and controversy, has advanced very little. Due to political prohibitions, some of those texts often circulated in a clandestine manner, but always with well-defined ideological and propaganda objectives.

Nor is this book a history of Byzantine literature in the iconoclastic period in a traditional sense. A detailed survey of the texts produced during the period is offered, but the real aim of this study is to shed light on how such texts worked. To that end, each work is analysed in a way intended to explain its form and functions, dating, authorship, historical background, political and religious impact and the motivations of the author and the commissioner, as well as the manners of diffusion and (where necessary) the manuscript tradition. Particular attention is given to the interrelationships of a number of works involving common authors or a common patron (the patriarch of Constantinople, a monastic superior, or the like), which are collected together and critically examined in order to reconstruct the circle of writers within which they were penned.

Time has made its own selection of the texts. The Byzantines sieved their own literary production, and we tend to think that many iconoclastic works were forgotten by the iconodules. Sometimes they were condemned as heretical and burnt, but most often they were simply ignored, becoming alien and sliding into oblivion. The First Iconoclasm (726–787) is within the limits of the Dark Age, which means that its literary output was already very poor in terms of quantity, with extremely few excellent authors. Some of the missing texts were also integrated into later works, as is true of the chronicles that used earlier historiographical narratives as sources. The case of Theophanes Continuatus is well known; he got his information about the Arab invasion of Sicily between 826 and 829 from the lost text of Theognostos. Although positive evidence for this work exists, reconstructing the original composition, identifying the literary context in which

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4 Brubaker and Haldon 2011; Brubaker 2012.
5 Garzya 1981; Magdalino 1993; Cameron 1994; Auzépy 2007; Cunningham 2011; Spanos 2014.
it was produced, and sketching its early dissemination is almost impossible and, in any case, beyond the scope of this study.

Extant texts from the First Iconoclasm are scarce and correspond to the limited number of individual authors who met with great acclaim from their contemporaries. Even if there was some subsequent censorship or purge, we do not know of any important individual writer of this era who suffered a damnatio memoriae condemning his compositions to oblivion. After the cruel seventh century and its decline, much of the eighth century was also almost barren from a literary point of view. Although Mullett has rightly characterised those years as a ‘period of reduced literacy’, some innovative literary themes and styles developed. Since the Dark Age, three genres had been privileged and continued to be cultivated with special emphasis: homiletics, hymnography and hagiography (the ‘three H’s’). Overproduction of them determines our study and explains why less attention is paid here to historiographical texts, which, although usually preferred by scholars, had been largely neglected since the seventh century and were not so widely produced in the ninth century. Finally, men of letters of the First Iconoclasm seem to modern eyes like isolated islands, remote from one another. Their reduced number and greater autonomy prevent us from describing the hypothetical group that may have conditioned their literary production, since we cannot trawl for the reciprocal contacts of these alleged primitive literary circles. The foreign origin of such authors – Andreas of Crete, Ioannes Damaskenos and Kosmas the Melode were born in Damascus, Syria, and later settled in Palestine – implies that they had no definite readers or established audience to respond to their compositions in literary form.

On the other hand, literary production increased exponentially during the iconodule interlude (787–815) and thereafter had closer links with Constantinople and its hinterland, making relevant data more accessible to the modern scholar. This allows for interpretative commentary describing the interconnected network within which a specific work was written, the politics of literature underlying its production and how the texts that form part of this circle worked politically and socially to promote the self-interested veneration of various saints. During the First Iconoclasm, in fact, the intellectual level of Byzantine society and rates of literacy

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increased significantly as a result of the theological controversy, multiplying the number of texts and specific details of their circulation that have reached us.\(^{14}\) This is the main reason why the period examined in this monograph largely coincides with the century of the Byzantine revival, that is, from the Iconodole hiatus (787–815) up to the end of the reign of Basileios I (867–886), covering the Second Iconoclasm (815–843) and the years after the Triumph of Orthodoxy. The accession of Leon VI the Wise to the throne in 886 meant the deposition of the erudite patriarch Photios and the birth of a new literary scenario,\(^{15}\) the greatest representative of which would be the learned Konstantinos VII Porphyrogennetos (913–959).\(^{16}\)

Iconoclasm is in essence a religious phenomenon, and it is therefore not unrelated to the demographic explosion of Byzantine monasticism in the second half of the eighth century. The increase in population owing to better living conditions\(^{17}\) meant a corresponding increase in the number of monks and priests unheard of until that time. This change in turn led more and more lay persons to choose the religious life, with a consequent exponential increase in the proportion of monks, priests and nuns to lay people. To this increase in the number of the professed must be added the different social extraction of the monks: more and more noble, wealthy individuals, well-educated and with good chances of prospering in society, chose to take vows.\(^{18}\) As a consequence, monastic culture flourished in all its splendour starting in 787. Reforms implemented in the monasteries promoted the intellectual training of their members. Educated individuals took advantage of the independence and serenity of monastic retreat to create an abundance of new literature in which it was not only the formulations that were new, but also the approach to traditional genres. At the same time, the high level of education of many new monks and the social and family networks they had before joining their monastery made them key players in the political evolution of the Empire. Their involvement in worldly events became more and more intense, their opposition to imperial power firmer and firmer and, thanks to the new literature they

\(^{14}\) Efthymiadis 2017 with previous bibliography.


\(^{18}\) For the large number of figures who founded or entered monasteries at the same time as Theodoros Stoudites, see Ringrose 1979; Déroche 1993; Kountoura-Galaki 1996; Hatlie 2007a: 283–86. Regarding the new socio-cultural extraction of monks and their large increase, cf. ibid., 399–408.
were producing, more and more effective. We thus find a highly educated monastic generation that in the first half of the ninth century did not hesitate to take the reins of public life, dictating the paths to follow in the daily life of the provinces and in imperial policy to preserve Orthodoxy, that is, their interpretation of Christian dogma. Of all the conflicts that occurred, one stands out as a result of the constant reinterpretation and reappropriation of it by subsequent generations: the defeat of iconoclasm.

As a heresy, iconoclasm not only demanded the destruction of images representing Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints as being contrary to divine law, but also meant an interpretation of previous Councils and ultimately a revision of Christology, since by denying the possibility of representing Christ, the iconoclasts were held to be denying his human nature.

Beyond its theological and apologetic texts, anti-iconoclast writing is above all a literature about saints, whose lives were taken as pretexts for narrating history in order to create a group identity and thus influence society. Not only was iconoclasm a dogmatic dispute that turned into a civil confrontation after the emperor took an official position, but it also created the situation of zealous men ready to sacrifice everything, even their own lives, in defence of their ideals. This attitude produced flight, gaol and torture, but also solidarity among the persecuted, and cohesion among those who found in their opposition to imperial power a form of religious life that could only be compared to that of the first Christians. Like the martyrs who gave their lives in the arenas before pagan emperors, the new heroes of Orthodoxy, often simply confessors (those who suffered for their faith), were an ideal subject for the writing of vivid narratives that testified to their exploits and their pious way of life. These stories were also perfect tools for bringing a monastic or social group together, for creating an identity and even for entering politics.

According to Theodorus Stoudites, devotion to saints required both texts and images to assist with a Christian understanding of their virtues. The promotion of this devotion for those killed in the iconoclast persecution includes an initial ideological and political element that is then confirmed by the contents of the narratives created for that promotion. Much of the literature produced during iconoclasm was thus directed towards gathering proof of the holiness of the neo-martyrs and denouncing the outrages of the heretics in a liturgical context. Usually, the

19 Treadgold 2012.
commemoration of saints was first recorded at a local level (in a specific 
menologion) and then recognised by the rest of the Byzantine Church 
without an official canonisation process.21 There were doubtless many 
oral traditions that were never put in writing and of which we know 
nothing.22 Others, however, were written down to praise these heroes, 
preserving them for posterity and making them models of behaviour. They 
have come down to us in an immense variety of literary forms ranging 
from long vitae, hagiographies that offer details of the life, good deeds and 
miracles of the saint, to liturgical hymns (kanones, kontakia, etc.) and 
entries for the synaxarion (calendar of saint’s days), to homiletic pieces 
such as panegyrics (enkomia) and accounts of the translation of relics 
(anakomidia).23 Regardless of their form, these texts were much loved by 
the public and also very abundant, to the extent that they can be considered 
the bestsellers of the Byzantine Empire.24 What is more, both writing/
copying them and reading them were considered proof of holiness.25 The 
patriarch Nikephoros and Tarasios, in fact, both dedicated the churches of 
their monasteries to the martyr saints, which is proof of the importance 
they attached to the confession (homologia) of the iconodules.26 

During the two stages of Iconoclasm (726–787 and 815–843), the 
quality and quantity of the literature produced varied, giving the impression 
that literature first disappeared and then took refuge behind the walls 
of the monasteries, following in the footsteps of some of the most out-
standing intellectuals. Kazhdan and Talbot, in their study of iconodule 
heroes, list some seventy-five testimonies among the vitae and notices from 
the Synaxarion of Constantinople,27 drawing attention to the great disparity

31 In the ninth century, there was no canonisation process in Constantinople; this was not to occur in 
the Byzantine Empire before the fourteenth century, see ODB 1, 372, s.v. ‘Canonization’. For the 
ways in which holiness could be publicly recognised in our period, see Delehaye 1927; Ehrhard 
Auzépy 1995; Efthymiadis 2006. As to the function of the hagiographic text in support of the 
sanctification process, see Pratsch 2003: 413–21; Efthymiadis 2011a: 1–14.
32 Thoud. Stoud., ɹπι. 386,62–64: ηχενὶ πάντα τὰ μαρτυρευματα διανηγναρθα εἰς τὸν ἄλλο ἄλλος 
βέβαια εἰς, κάθειν αἱ διδασκαλίαι ἀφορίζονται ποιεῖν τὰ τῶν μαρτυρευμάτων ἱγκόμια.
34 Halkin 1967: 345.
35 Vita of Georgios of Amastris 13–14. On the work of the copyists and their self-awareness, see 
Ronconi 2014.
36 With regard to the church of the monastery of Nikephoros, cf. Ruggieri 1991: 203, n. 81;
Translation of the Patriarch Nikephoros 5, p. 120; Janin 1975: 27. For the monastery founded by 
Tarasios, which furthermore was decorated with a complex iconographic cycle, see Vita of the 
and 202.
between the saints commemorated in the two stages. In the first, which lasted almost twice as long (over sixty years), we know of few confessors who were persecuted, and curiously enough – or perhaps not so curiously – none of the hagiographical texts treating them was contemporary. Indeed, in the eighth century nothing seems to have been written in honour of any new heroes of Orthodoxy, in striking contrast to the comparatively abundant compositions in honour of the primitive martyrs and traditional saints. Only five hagiographic texts were certainly written in the first half of that century, and they were mostly not about iconodules: the Roman *Miracles of Anastasios the Persian*; the anonymous *Vita of David of Thessalonike*; Andreas’ *Vita of St Patapios* and *Vita of St Therapon* and Ioannes Damaskenos’ *Enkomion of St Barbara*. The case of hagiography is paradigmatic and exemplifies what was taking place in other genres.

In the ninth century, however, there was a noteworthy proliferation of texts written after the initial restoration of icons at the Second Council of Nicaea: in about the year 860, Konstantinos of Tios composed the *translatio* of the relics of Euphemia of Chalcedon (*BHG* 621), who was martyred in 765 and venerated in Constantinople from antiquity until the iconoclast Emperor Leon III (717–741) desecrated her remains and threw them into the sea. The interlude of restoration initiated by Empress Eirene produced only ca. 809 a *vita* of an iconophile martyr, Stephanos the Younger (d. 865), written by the deacon of Hagia Sophia (*BHG* 1666). By contrast, the second iconoclastic period (815–843) and the years following the Triumph of Orthodoxy produced a true hotbed of religious fervour and literary inspiration, including an exponential upsurge in *vitae* about contemporary individuals persecuted for venerating images (but almost never as far as being executed, since mere harassment or exile was enough to earn a reputation as an iconodule confessor). At that time (the first quarter of the ninth century), the nerve centre of the genre was not yet exclusively Constantinople, as is shown by the texts written in

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18 As already said, in the eighth century literariness was limited with extremely little textual production. This is likely the main reason for the lack of testimonies, see Haldon 2014.

19 Nonetheless, there are indications that the patriarch Tarasios wrote *enkomia* in honour of the martyrs of the end of the century, see *Vita of the Patriarch Tarasios* 49 and 55.

20 Apparently, the body of Euphemia of Chalcedon remained uncorrupted but in pieces and her sepulchre ended up arriving on the island of Lemnos, a destination that the Empress Eirene had learned of through a vision. The official hagiographer of her repatriation was Konstantinos of Tios (*PNbZ* # 3878), who provides further details in his work *On the Relics of St Euphemia*.

21 *Vita of Stephanos the Younger* 47.22–27; ch. 53 and pp. 5–9. For the different forms of ecclesiastical propaganda during these years, see Auzépy 1998: 95–99.
Palestine. But texts composed about the capital and in it were gradually accumulating and referred to events that took place there or were addressed to an audience with strong ties to the court.

It was during the Second Iconoclasm (815–843) that there was a creative explosion that would set the foundations of the literature against iconoclasm and of a new Byzantine identity. The texts written during these years of resistance were complemented by new narratives during the early decades of the post-iconoclast Church, which was led successively by Methodios, Ignatios and Photios. These men approached events during the iconoclast crisis as justifying situations that affected them directly, at the same time that they culled previous materials and voluntarily or involuntarily rewrote historical fact. Our idea of what iconoclasm was and how it operated is due to these biased texts, but also to the lack of evidence from the opposing faction. We must therefore not fall into the trap of assuming that the absence of evidence is evidence of absence, and should envisage the possibility that iconodule hagiography was at least partly shaped by dialogue with a now lost iconoclast literary discourse. A case in point is the conclusion of Methodios’ *Vita of Euthymios of Sardis*, which includes a theological controversy regarding the relationship between *eikon* and *logos* that can be seen as a refutation of Ioannes VII Grammatikos’ thesis that *logos* is the only true form of representation. Most important, it has been clear since Ševčenko’s seminal article that there was a tradition of iconoclast hagiography, the vestiges of which somehow survived the iconodule purge.

The selective preservation of sources, many of which were destroyed by the victors, means that the extent of the written production of the iconoclasts can be estimated only with difficulty today. Many texts (for example, medical treatises) must have been copied, written and read by the iconoclasts, but those related to the controversy were condemned to oblivion or drastically rewritten. The iconodules succeeded brilliantly in directing their project in such a way that their contemporaries and subsequent generations got the impression that literature during and after the

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54 As shown by the case study analysed by Ronconi 2017, who focused on the letters of Theodoros of Stoudios and their initial sifting.


56 This was the case of the *Synopsis artis medicae*, a short medical encyclopaedia in seven volumes edited by Ermerins 1840: 79–221 and attributed to Leon the Mathematician by Ieraci Bio 1989: 217–18.
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Second Iconoclasm was essentially an anti-iconoclast enterprise, an intellectual weapon of resistance to a persecuting regime distinguished by basically non-intellectual methods. Unfortunately, the lack of iconoclast texts is compounded by the problem that those we know of or that can be reconstructed are oases in the desert. The independent nature and the isolated and decontextualised transmission of the surviving texts (such as Leon’s medical encyclopaedia and the Vita of Pankratios of Taormina) do not allow us to carry out a sociological study of their underlying relationships. The impression created, moreover, is that they played an unimportant part in the creation of a collective identity and were not determinant in the evolution of the major currents of Byzantine literature, in contrast to iconodule material. Such is the case with the texts written by the most prominent iconoclasts we can trace: the patriarch Ioannes VII Grammatikos completed an assignment from Emperor Leon V to compile a florilegium,37 wrote two biblical catenae,38 penned an apologetic work,39 compiled the collection of gnomai in the Florilegium Marcianum40 and even seems to have composed iconoclastic poems.41

Leon the Mathematician, a relative of the patriarch Ioannes Grammatikos who was the archbishop of Thessaloniki between 840 and 843, is also considered a great exponent of the iconoclast establishment.42 Although the sources do not describe him as a bitter enemy of images, his literary production is generally taken to be iconoclast. His scientific interests set him apart from the more humanist trend or school of ‘letters’ followed by iconodule authors such as Methodios or Photios, to the extent that modern scholars have seen in this opposition a parallel to the image controversy: scientific contents (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, etc.) were characteristic of the iconoclasts, in contrast to the humanistic knowledge cultivated by the iconodules.43 A good example of this position is the


38 Ceulemans and Van Deun 2017: 372–75.


42 He was probably his cousin or perhaps his nephew, as the terms ἀδελφός ‘nephew’ and ἄδελφος ‘cousin’ used by Byzantine historians are interchangeable, cf. Nicol 1984: 84. On Leon, see PmbZ # 4440, 24312 and 24313; PBE I: Leon 19; ODB, s.v. Leo the Philosopher; Bury 1912: 436–42; Koltas 1939: 61E; Mango 1960; Lemerle 1971: 148–76. On Leon’s literary production, see Laurent 1964; Lemerle 1971: 185–91; Westerink 1986; Lauxtermann 2019: 142–44 and 146–47.

complete contempt of the author of the *Vita of Ioannes Psichaites* for these disciplines – syllogisms, sophisms, Astronomy, Geometry and Arithmetic ‘are non-existent things’ – which he considers typical of iconoclasts.\(^4^4\) The passing from one model to another and the friction between them can be seen in some short poems by Konstantinos Sikelo, who abandoned the teachings of Leon the Mathematician to continue his training in the circle of the patriarch Photios.\(^4^5\) In a *psogos* against his first teacher, Konstantinos accused him of being a poor Christian because he was devoted to pagans such as Homer, Aratus, Euclid and Ptolemy. After Leon’s death, Konstantinos dedicated an *Apology* to him in which he repeated his accusations and which was accompanied with other verses in which he affirmed that he had finally found the source of salvation, ‘the Christian rhetoric of Photios that paves the way to heaven’.\(^4^6\)

Leon’s surviving work is not sufficiently representative and does not allow us to corroborate or refute the image transmitted by his iconodule contemporaries (monks) that scholars like him, who were linked to iconoclasm and patriarchal hierarchy, cultivated pagan disciplines during the Second Iconoclasm. The evidence indicates that this circle was very interested in Neoplatonism, erotic poetry, astronomy and divination.\(^4^7\) Be that as it may, two texts that are more or less similar to those discussed in the following chapters allow us to qualify their approach. Leon’s homily on the Annunciation of the Virgin has several intertexts with sermons by Gregorios of Nazianzus, but no attacks on icons or defence of iconoclasm by this ‘disciple of Pythagoras’.\(^4^8\) His long poem *Job, or, On Indifference to Grief and on Patience* (Ἰῷβ ἢ περὶ ἀλυπίας καὶ ὑπομονῆς) is along the same lines and in a sense can be considered hagiographical. It is a version in 638 dactylic hexameters of the biblical Book of Job, which stands out for mixing pagan characters and mythological figures with biblical protagonists and Christian martyrs. As models for enduring family hardship, Leon accordingly proposes Thales, who decided to have no children so as not to suffer, and Xenophon, who lost his son in war and was able to overcome this misfortune (ll. 227–315), in the same way King David and Abraham were able to accept the deaths of theirs (ll. 339–56). In the consolation he produces, Leon goes so far as to compare the death of Socrates to the martyrdom of the saints who confronted the tyrants (ll. 395–99).

\(^{4^5}\) Spadaro 1971; Lauxtermann 2003: 98–99 and 106. On Konstantinos, see PmbZ # 23741.
\(^{4^8}\) Laurent 1964: 286; Senina 2008a: 328–33.