

CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING RELIGIOUS ICONS FROM THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

By

Kallie Haines

Caitlin Maston

THESIS:

- In the Byzantine Empire, icons as religious works of art were appreciated by everyone.

PRIMARY SOURCES:

- Religious icons of *Madonna and Child*, *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* and *Saint Demetrios* from the secondary source:
 - Brooks, Sarah. "Icons and Iconoclasm in Byzantium." *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. 2010. Metropolitan Museum of Art. 20 February 2010. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm>.
- Religious images of *Icon of Christ*, *Icon of the Triumph of Orthodoxy*, *Icon of the Virgin and Child*, *Illustration of Iconoclasts Whitewashing an Icon of Christ* and *Mosaic Panel of Justinian* from the secondary source:
 - Cormack, Robin. *Byzantine Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Religious gold icon of the *Archangel Michael* from the secondary source:
 - Grabar, André. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire: Byzantine Art in the Middle Ages*. New York: Greystone Press, 1963.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

- Boyce, Paul. *Byzantine Icon Art: Byzantine Iconography – A Brief Overview*. Christian Sanctuary Gallery. 20 February 2010.

<<http://www.csg-i.com/icons/index.shtml>>.

- Boyce's website takes the perspective of those who appreciated the religious use of images by explaining that icons have been called prayers, hymns and sermons in form, as well as colour. The website also discusses how icons were considered to be the link between the human and the divine. Boyce concludes by stating how in a world full of tragedy, icons have provided courage and strength.
- Brooks, Sarah. "Icons and Iconoclasm in Byzantium." *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. 2010. Metropolitan Museum of Art. 20 February 2010.
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm>.
 - Writing from the perspective of an admirer of religious images, Brooks' portion of the website discusses how icons ranged in size and were created in various types of media, including marble, ivory, gemstone, etc. Brooks concludes by discussing the Byzantine iconoclasms and the after effects the controversies had on religious images.
- Cameron, Averil. *The Byzantines*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006.
 - In her book, Cameron discusses prominent historical figures, who were highly involved with the iconoclastic disputes of the 8th and 9th centuries. Cameron begins by concentrating on Leo III and his son, Constantine, who ordered the icons in churches to be destroyed. Cameron also takes the other side of the controversy into consideration by including John of Damascus, who was in defence of the images, as well as Empress Irene, who had the policy concerning the destruction of icons reversed.
- Cormack, Robin. *Byzantine Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
 - In his book, Cormack discusses how religious icons were at the centre of Byzantine art and life. By incorporating pictures of icons from the past, Cormack explains their significance, as well as the deep symbolic language behind each one. After explaining various religious icons,

Cormack discusses the infamous iconoclasms, which took place during the 8th and 9th centuries. He looks at the controversy from both perspectives, those who truly appreciated religious icons and those who supported their destruction. Lastly, Cormack addresses the after effects he feels iconoclasm played in the Byzantine Empire.

- De Ruyter, P.W. *What are Byzantine Icons? The Visual and Spiritual Treasures of the Eastern Orthodox Church*. 12 May 2007. Icons Explained. 20 February 2010. <http://www.iconsexplained.com/iec/byz_about_byzantine_icons.htm>.
 - De Ruyter's website explains in simple terms the deep meaning behind unique religious icons. From the perspective of those who appreciated religious icons, De Ruyter discusses how icons acted as windows into Heaven. This happened due to the fact that the person praying could directly connect with Christ through the figure depicted in the icon.
- Demus, Otto. "The Classical System of Middle Byzantine Church Decoration." *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium*. New Rochelle, New York: Caratzas Brothers, 1976. 3-37.
 - In his book, Demus focuses on arguments from both sides of the iconoclastic controversies. He states that iconoclasts believed the only real religious image of Christ was the Eucharist. On the other hand, Demus takes into consideration the viewpoint of the iconophiles, who believed it was possible to create icons that represented Christ in a symbolic form.
- Huyghe, René, ed. *Larousse Encyclopedia of Byzantine and Medieval Art*. New York: Prometheus Press, 1963.
 - The section of Huyghe's encyclopedia we focused on contained information pertaining to the supporters of religious images in the iconoclastic debates. Huyghe goes into detail and explains how the

supporters of religious art argued that icons enabled illiterate individuals to understand through pictures what they could not read in words.

- Khalaf, Salim George. *Byzantine Emperor Who Was One of Us*. 2010. Phoenician Canaanite Encyclopedia. 20 February 2010. <<http://phoenicia.org/leo.html>>.
 - Khalaf's website mainly focuses on the perspective of Emperor Leo III, who was strongly opposed to the religious use of images. Khalaf explains that Leo III's son and successor, Constantine went even further by stating the worship of images was idolatry. The website also pays particular attention to John of Damascus, who was in defence of icons and stirred many people to resistance.
- Pigott, Robert. "Italians Cross About Crucifixes." *Faith Diary: Whose God is Allah?* 5 November 2009. BBC News. 24 February 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8345705.stm>.
 - Pigott's article on the BBC News website discusses how religion and schools are connected. He features perspectives to both sides of an argument pertaining to a recent ruling, which will take crucifixes out of Italian schools. While some individuals support this decision, it has angered church leaders, who believe the crucifix is more than a religious symbol.
- Ware, Timothy. *The Essence of Orthodox Iconography: The Tradition of Iconography*. 1998. The Greek Orthodox Church of the Holy Cross. 20 February 2010. <http://www.goholycross.org/studies/studies_icons.html>.
 - Through the perspective of individuals who admired icons, Ware's website explains the basics behind religious icons and how they were meant to inspire and teach. Ware also discusses that iconography attempted to make the Divine Liturgy understandable to a general population.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY:

- Although we believe the sources contain crucial information pertaining to our argument, we realize that it is ultimately the authors' viewpoints that come across in the texts. We feel the authors have the final decision as to what information is placed in the sources and what essential material is left out.
- Looking at the sources, the oldest is dated from the 1960s. We feel we could potentially be missing vital and useful information from older sources concerning religious icons from the Byzantine Empire. On the other hand, by having a couple sources that are over forty years old, they may contain material that has since been outdated.
- As researchers for this project, we feel that we are also a limitation to the study. We selected the sources we wanted to use, as well as pinpointed specific details we felt were necessary to include in our discussion. While writing, we discovered how research is complex and endless. We were forced to narrow our focus and exclude historical figures, pictures of icons or other information that may have been of greater importance to another person.

NEW VOCABULARY:

- Icon – sacred paintings of Christ, the Virgin, angels and saints (De Ruyter).
- Iconoclasm – literally means “image breaking” or the destruction of images for religious reasons (Brooks).
- Iconoclast – icon-smashers who supported the destruction of images and were suspicious of religious art that represented human figures or Christ (Ware).
- Iconophile – supporters and admirers of religious images who defended the use of icons (Ware).
- John of Damascus – a Syrian monk and writer, who was a strong supporter in the defence of icons (Khalaf).

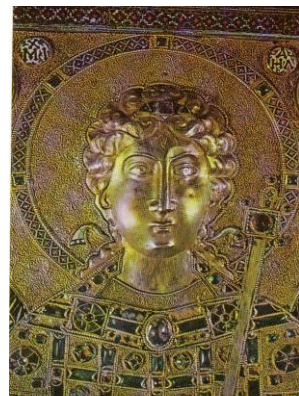
- Leo III – an iconoclastic Emperor, who ordered all icons to be removed from churches. His successor and son, Constantine held the same beliefs (Khalaf).

WHAT ARE BYZANTINE ICONS?

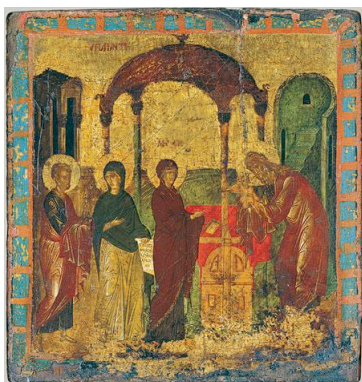
- Byzantine icons are sacred images, which represent Christ, the Virgin, angels and saints. They decorate Orthodox churches and act as visual gospels (Boyce). Icons tend to range in size from grand to miniature, with certain ones acting as pendants to be worn around the neck (Brooks). Icons are full of symbolism and they are characterized by vivid colours, as well as their gold backgrounds (De Ruyter). Byzantine icons were made using various materials, including ivory, gold, wood, fresco and mosaic (Brooks).



Ivory icon with Saint Demetrios
(Brooks)



Gold icon of the Archangel Michael
(Grabar 160)



Painted wood icon with the
Presentation of Christ in the Temple
(Brooks)



Mosaic panel of Justinian
(Cormack 61)

ICON APPRECIATION – THE ICONOPHILE PERSPECTIVE:

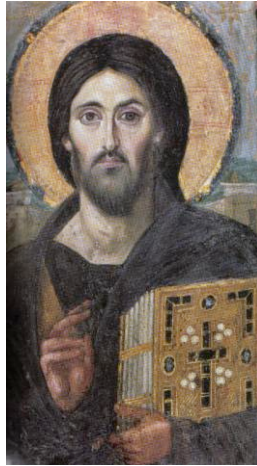
The Purpose of Icons:

- Byzantine iconophiles felt that icons served the purpose of inspiring, teaching and guiding people in their spiritual life (Ware). In order to show their devotion, iconophiles typically bowed, prayed and kissed icons. They believed that if icons solely hung on the walls of churches or homes for decoration, the images held no purpose (Boyce). Byzantine iconophiles also believed that religious icons were able to create a link between the worshipper and God. When the worshipper prayed to the person depicted in the image, the icon acted as a “window into Heaven” by directly connecting them with Christ, the Virgin, angels and saints (De Ruyter). Those who prayed to icons and appreciated them typically asked for miraculous healings and good fortune (Brooks).
- As supporters of religious art, iconophiles expressed their views that icons in churches assisted individuals who were illiterate to understand through visual images what they could not read in words (Huyghe 268). Through visual representations, even the illiterate population could learn to recognize the names of saints, as well as distinguish the main narrative subjects and stories. For individuals who could read, icons simply emphasized even further their comprehension of biblical stories and prominent figures (Cormack 76). As St. Basil stated perfectly about religious images: “What the word transmits through the ear, the painting silently shows through the image” (Boyce).

Symbolism:

- Iconophiles from the Byzantine Empire believed all icons were unique and full of symbolism. After examining various icons, it may seem that they only portray width and height. However, there is a third dimension that actually goes beyond what our eyes can see and enters the spiritual realm of symbolic meaning. Take for instance the icon of Christ below, which emphasizes specific features: His ears are large, which represents He hears everything, while His mouth is depicted as small, symbolizing that He only speaks words of wisdom (De

Ruyter). The crown of light symbolizes Christ's radiating glory and surrounds His head as it is the center of the spirit (Ware).



Icon of Christ
(Cormack 67)

- During our research, we noticed that the Virgin and Child were two common figures who were admired by the Byzantine iconophiles, as well as represented on religious icons. While each image offers different representations, as well as being unique, there are still evident similarities between icons of the Virgin and Child. In the following examples, both icons featuring these two figures represent beauty and importance. From the images, it is clear that the Madonna or Virgin cherishes her miraculous Son and holds Him closely in her hands. In both icons, the Virgin's hand is pointed to her Child, which represents and symbolizes that He is the way to salvation (Cormack 182).



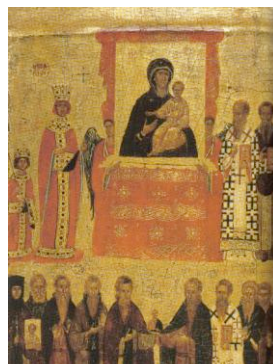
Icon of the Virgin and Child (10th century)
(Cormack 182)



Madonna and Child (11th century)
(Brooks)

John of Damascus:

- Although John of Damascus died before the end of iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire, he was a prominent figure who was in the defence of the veneration of icons. His writings contained in three *Orations against those who attack the holy images* was written from a monastery near Jerusalem and was considered to be one of the most important defences in support of images (Cameron 102). Damascus opposed the Byzantine monarch, as he felt the destruction of religious icons was an unlawful action. He believed that a religious icon enabled the worshipper to connect with the unseen and spiritual world. Damascus argued that the admiration of icons was not idolatry, but that they simply demonstrated our faith, as well as professed our belief in the Incarnation (Khalaf).
- Although iconoclasm was reversed by Empress Irene in 787, the controversy appeared again in 815. The second wave of iconoclasm seemed to die away due to declining military and economic crises. It was Empress Theodora who permitted religious images once again in 843 (Cameron 102). The following icon depicts iconoclasm from an iconophile perspective and we feel it represents John of Damascus' feelings perfectly. The icon entitled "The Triumph of Orthodoxy" represents the end of iconoclasm. The image declares the importance of icons in the Orthodox church and represents prominent figures who were against the destruction of images. Empress Theodora and her son Michael III are positioned to the left, while two icons of Christ are held by iconophiles on the bottom. At the center of the icon the Virgin and Child are displayed, symbolizing their importance (Cormack 29).



Icon of the Triumph of Orthodoxy
(Cormack 28)

WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE BYZANTINE ICONOCLASMS?

- Unlike our argument suggested, religious Byzantine icons were not appreciated by everyone. Iconoclasms dominated the Byzantine Empire throughout the 8th and early 9th centuries in two phases. The first iconoclasm lasted from 726-81, while the second took place from 815-43. During these periods of time thousands of religious images were destroyed by whitewashing or defacement, which resulted in very few early Byzantine icons surviving. While these iconoclasms were occurring, the production and use of any religious images were also banned (Brooks). Although our sources did not contain any pictures of defaced icons, the following image from 843 shows a manuscript illustration of the Crucifixion and iconoclasts whitewashing an icon of Christ (Cormack 101).

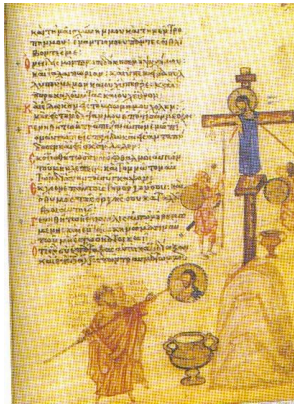


Illustration of iconoclasts whitewashing an icon of Christ
(Cormack 101)

DESTRUCTION OF ICONS – THE ICONOCLAST PERSPECTIVE:

Debate:

- According to iconoclasts, worshipping religious icons was considered an abuse amounting to idolatry (Cameron 102). They felt that religious icons broke one of the Ten Commandments, which forbids making and worshipping images. Iconoclasts condemned the production of religious images, as they felt it was

impossible to represent Christ. In their opinion the only true image of Christ was the Eucharist, which they believed was His actual body and blood. Simply by attempting to construct an image of Christ, the icon artist was automatically separating His divine and human nature, as the divine cannot be represented. On the other hand, iconophiles argued that it was possible to represent Christ symbolically since it was similar to how the Holy Liturgy is a reproduction of the Passion (Demus 6).

Leo III

- In 726, Emperor Leo III had the worship of icons banned. Leo III was strongly in opposition to the religious use of images and he regarded it to be idolatrous to worship icons. Khalaf states that in 726, Leo III interpreted a devastating underwater earthquake to be a warning sign from the divine to turn back to Christ. By 730, Leo III had ordered all religious icons to be removed from the churches, which began a war of military force against images (Khalaf). Throughout his reign, Leo III attempted to eliminate religious images that had been growing in popularity among individuals. Although Leo III gained the support from some clergy members, there was little sign of any popular support and many fierce campaigns rose against him (Cameron 102). It was only in Rome and North Italy that the force of the powerful Emperor was not felt. After Leo III's reign, his son and successor Constantine furthered his father's beliefs by condemning the worship of images as idolatrous (Khalaf).

After Effects of the Byzantine Iconoclasms:

- The Byzantine church considered the end of the second wave of iconoclasm in 843 to be the ultimate victory. During this time there was a great revival and reintroduction to religious art, as well as holy icons (Cormack 105). Icon types from earlier centuries were copied in the Middle and Late Byzantine periods. Monastic life soared with new commissioned books and texts, as well as pictorial schemes being created to decorate the churches (Cameron 105). Cormack states that the downside to iconoclasm was the disruption of the artists' working conditions, as well as their access to essential materials. Since art was an

apprenticeship system where the father passed his knowledge and tools onto his son, Cormack stresses the difficulty iconoclasm would have caused by halting these necessary procedures (111). After the iconoclasms ended, religious icons were able to return to their primary role by serving the beliefs of the artists and admirers (Cameron 105).

CONNECTION TO TODAY'S SOCIETY:

- Our research on the Byzantine iconoclasms led us to an article about crucifixes in Italy. The news article reminded us of the two different perspectives of the iconoclasts and the iconophiles. Piagott's report pertains to the European Court of Human Rights and a recent ruling against the use of crucifixes in Italian classrooms. Before the ruling was addressed, a law from over eighty years ago required crucifixes to be hung in all Italian schools. Certain individuals objected to the presence of crucifixes in schools, as they felt they should be able to give their children a secular education. Although there were people who supported the new ruling, many church leaders professed their anger. They stressed that the crucifix is more than just a religious symbol. Instead, it is an old tradition that is not meant to divide or exclude individuals (Piagott).
- We find that religious issues have caused controversies in Canadian public schools as well and that religion seems to have been taken out of the classroom. Instead, public schools are secular and they are separated from religion. Years ago, teachers read their students passages from the Bible and recited the Lord's Prayer. However, today religious images do not hold power in schools and they are not present in classrooms. We believe that it is essential to examine and evaluate the changes that have occurred over time. Although many of us tend not to look back to the Byzantine Empire, it is interesting to review the past in order to see how society has altered significantly.

CONCLUSIONS:

- Although we argued that religious icons from the Byzantine Empire were appreciated by everyone, our statement was falsified through research. We discovered that throughout the 8th and early 9th centuries, the Byzantines went through two waves of iconoclasms (Cameron 101). From the beginning of our research, it became evident that the iconoclasts were strongly against the worship of religious images. The iconoclasts went so far as having religious icons removed from churches, as well as having them whitewashed or destroyed. They felt the worship of icons bordered on idolatry and broke one of the Ten Commandments (Demus 6).
- On the other hand, we discovered how in the lives of the iconophiles, religious icons played a personal and emotional role in worship (Cormack 69). They truly appreciated religious images and believed that icons held a deep, symbolic meaning. Through the figure depicted in the icon, iconophiles believed their prayers were received by the spiritual world (Cormack 2). In a world full of tragedy and suffering, icons were able to provide joy, courage, as well as strength (Boyce). From our findings, we feel that the iconoclasms greatly affected the Byzantine Empire and left lasting effects that influenced future centuries.