Icons and the Beginning of the Isaurian Iconoclasm under Leo III

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Abstract

To understand the confrontation and fierce feelings expressed, pro and con, concerning the iconoclastic actions of the Isaurian emperors, one must first understand what an icon is. What are the characteristics that define the holy icons, the ayies eikones, which "are regarded by members of the Orthodox Christian Church as sacramental?"\(^1\) And what led Leo III, Emperor of the Byzantine Empire, to proclaim the icons illegal? Why did he view the icons as blasphemies against God, and ban them, despite the vigorous protest of many of his subjects? This caused incredible internal turmoil within his Empire, why did Leo pick this as the time to implement iconoclasm, when he was trying to fend off the encroachment of the Muslims upon the Byzantine state?

In 730 CE Leo III, Emperor of the Byzantine Empire, proclaimed the religious pictures known as icons illegal and ordered their destruction. Previous Emperors had not only tolerated, but actually promoted the icons to their subjects as an aid in Orthodox Christian worship. Leo, however, was on the side of the Iconoclasts, who viewed the icons as blasphemies against God. Leo banned the icons, eventually even ordering them destroyed, despite the vigorous protests of many of his subjects. This Iconoclasm caused incredible internal turmoil and dissension within his Empire, at a time when Leo was trying to fend off the encroachment of the Arabs upon the Byzantine state. Leo's choice to move ahead with his destructive program of Iconoclasm while possibly endangering the integrity of his empire demands investigation of his motives.

To understand the confrontation and fierce feelings expressed concerning the Iconoclastic actions of the Isaurian emperors, one must first understand what an icon is. There are certain important characteristics that define the holy icons. An icon is a picture depicting a religious hero of church lore. These images were thought to contain the essence of the person being represented. They are *eikones*, which "are regarded by members of the Orthodox Christian Church as sacramental". A standard orthodox icon is a painting on wood planks, with the painter following set traditional rules and styles, "using existing icons as guides or by consulting pattern books" that define the image created as an icon. To stray outside of these boundaries was not acceptable, as tradition has standardized the techniques that are used and permitted. The demand for icons with such specialized techniques necessary created a trade craft; icons were made by artists for sale to the people. In varying degrees of price the icons could be grand enough for display on an iconostasis in churches large or small, or a simple icon of a favorite saint for the small farmer's personal family icon, to be displayed at home. "What is a house..."
without icons? A shelter for animals," a Greek villager is quoted as saying.7

One of the most important aspects in creating an icon is that it is not supposed to be an exact copy of a person's likeness. Rather, it needs to be a stylized representation, an idealized rendering of the person in a spiritual sense, with simple lines, facial features, and use of unmixed colors. ".the icon is not a portrait of the outward form of a man but reveals the inner form of a saint."8 Gold leaf was often applied, as background and within the image itself, to make the icon seem to put forth its own divine light.9 Another constant is the depiction of the subject looking outward, toward the viewer; so that the devout could feel they were personally receiving whatever message was meant to be conveyed, from receiving a blessing, to acknowledging the pain and sacrifice of Christ on the cross.10

It is these strong personal messages and interactions that made the use of the icons so powerful, as well as controversial. Prior to the official Iconoclasm of Emperor Leo III in 730, the orthodox Iconophiles (literally icon lover, those who were pro icon) had needed to defend their icons against charges of idolatry. Challenges were being issued against icons from as early as the reign of Constantine the Great in the fourth century. When the use of icons was initially on the rise,11 Jews, pagans, and other doubting Byzantines had questioned their use by Christians.12 The main question regarding the icons was whether their veneration was breaking the Mosaic Law forbidding the construction and worship of idols. Even in the fourth century the feelings regarding icons were strong, as evidenced by the letter that Constantine's sister Constantina wrote to Bishop Eusebios of Caesarea. In it she was requesting that he provide an image of Christ for her. The Bishop replied no, stating that he was strongly against these iconographic depictions. He even questioned whether it was possible to depict the form of Christ in an image at all, as

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7 Kenna pg. 364
8 Kenna pg. 355
10 Kenna p. 356
11 Gregory p. 186 “..especially after the conversion of Constantine, religious pictures began to be employed.”
Icons and the Beginning of the Isaurian Iconoclasm under Leo III

well as adding that the second commandment expressly prohibits the worship of graven images.13

Among other learned holy men of the time, however, it appears that icons were an accepted exception to the law. Icons were viewed as necessary so that the simpler folk could find the way to God. Hypatius of Ephesus, in a correspondence to Julian, bishop of Atramition, stated that "But we allow simpler and immature folk to have these...that thus they may learn through the eye..."14 As many were unable to read the writings of the church, churchmen found that with the icons as a tool they could provide guidance and a spiritual understanding through the paintings to influence the masses. The saying a picture is worth a thousand words seems apropos. As time went on, it appears that the exception of icons to the Mosaic Law became the rule for the orthodox.15

According to orthodox tradition, Jesus created the first icon by "wiping his face on a linen cloth and imprinting his features on it."16 This artifact, known as the Mandylion, became a symbol of the orthodox Iconophiles, who used it to justify the making of icons, despite the mosaic ban. According to the orthodox, veneration of the Mandylion was not worship of the cloth as a god, but respecting and revering the god who created it, who had presented it to the faithful as a reminder of his works on Earth. This idea was also extended to other key religious symbols involving Christ. Leontius, Bishop of Neapolis in Cyprus, wrote concerning this in an appeal to "the Jews who charged the Christians with having introduced idolatry in the Church."17 In answer to the charge that the Christians were worshipping an idol in the form of the cross, Leontius replied: "We do not make obeisance to the nature of the wood but we revere and do obeisance to Him who was crucified on the Cross."18 In his mind, icons are not worshipped as being the actual God or saint, but rather they are being venerated, as being a visual and physical representation in the spirit of the subject, and who or what it represents. The spirit of the saint

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13 Gregory p. 61 - 62
14 Baynes p.94
15 Gregory p. 189 "There is reason to believe that in the sixth century...the use of ikons became more widespread, as personal devotion to them increased and as political and religious leaders more and more identified themselves with ikons and used them to increase their own power. A mark of this was when the Quinisext Council...in 691/2 decreed that Christ should not be depicted as a symbol but rather "in his human form."
16 Kenna p. 348
17 Baynes p.97
18 Baynes p.99 referencing Migne, Patrologia Graeca 94 col. 1384 B
represented is present through the depiction in the icon. Through this veneration, the icon is a way for the faithful to express their devotion, and make a personal connection through honoring and offering obeisance to the image, accepting the spiritual message it is meant to convey.

Emperor Leo III, however, did not hold the view that icons were an innocent form of worship. He, along with many other Christians, mainly in the Eastern provinces, "regarded icon veneration as a serious sin."\(^{19}\) Leo III, along with a great deal of the personnel serving in the armed forces, blamed the iconophiles for practicing idolatry in worshiping the icons, and that this blasphemy was the cause of the Arab attacks on the Empire.\(^{20}\) Leo did, however, start to stem the tide of the Muslim advance, defeating an army of Arabs that were attacking Constantinople toward the beginning of his reign.

Then, in 725 CE, "the Island of Thera (in the middle of the Aegean Sea) was wracked by a huge volcanic eruption..."\(^{21}\) which, according to Theophanes, Leo took as a sign that God was displeased with the actions of the commandment breaking iconophiles.\(^{22}\) It was with this reasoning that Leo later began, in 726 CE, a campaign to remove or destroy all the religious-based images known as icons. We know this campaign as iconoclasm, literally "icon smashing." At first, he spoke out against public display of the icons, ordering their removal. Under his son Constantine V, the policy progressed to outright persecution of iconophiles, and advocating actual destruction of the icons.\(^{23}\) Many theories have been suggested as to what influences on Leo may have led him down this path. There are several possible motivations and beliefs that may have helped Leo come to such a difficult choice as implementing the iconoclasm, against the wishes of so many of his subjects. He had reigned for nearly 10 years before he began his negative campaign against the icons in 726, if his hand was forced, his reasoning must have been for very set reasons, and needs to be understood.

His primary justification to his people for the iconoclasm was the need to destroy what he viewed as blasphemies unto God, but he may also have

\(^{19}\) Gregory p.192  
\(^{20}\) Gregory p.192  
\(^{21}\) Gregory p.192  
\(^{22}\) Theophanes Confessor - Excerpt from "Chronicle" - Ninth Century - Sources of the Making of the West. Edited by Luakdi, Katherine J. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins Press, 2005  p. 137  
\(^{23}\) Gregory p. 194
Icons and the Beginning of the Isaurian Iconoclasm under Leo III

had other ulterior motives. One possible motive was that enacting this measure would help to solidify and focus the people's support toward the sanctity of his sacred rule. "Iconoclasm effectively centered power in the hands of the emperor at the expense of the church and monks, and this transfer of power the educated class resented as well."24 As a great deal of the educated class were also iconophiles, the ensuing persecution they suffered also served to slow or stop the educational systems set up in Constantinople. Per Theophanes, "This (persecutions) led to the extinction of schools and the pious education that had lasted from St. Constantine the Great until our days, but was destroyed.....by this Saracen-minded Leo..."25 His first act in implementing his new policy was the removal of the image of Christ from the Chalke Gate of the imperial palace, a highly visible symbol to the people. Opposition grew, within the city and in the Western provinces of the Empire.26 To head off this movement, Leo called a synod on the matter with his imperial council, and the council subsequently declared icons illegal. The Patriarch of Constantinople, Germanus, openly disagreed with the new policy, and Leo deposed him, replacing him with Anastasios, who agreed with him totally on the new official policy of condemning the icons.

Another possible theory, suggested by Theophanes, is that Leo III had been somewhat influenced in his thinking by his contact with an "Arab vizier and a Jewish wizard."27 It is unlikely that such direct contact existed, but it is possible that some general influences from these religions' ban on certain images may have entered into the thinking of the Emperor. Another view is that the struggle over icons was divided between the eastern and western empire, between the "Hellenized" west, with their supposed Greek leanings toward representational art, and the "Oriental" east, with its people influenced by its exposure to Semitic and Islamic visual traditions.28 Leo's family originated out of Syria (hence the Isaurian moniker) but it is not known how influenced Leo was by these possible differentiations between the eastern and western cultures.

25 Theophanes p. 137
26 Gregory p.190
27 Gregory p.191
28 Gregory p. 192
Emperor Leo III’s iconoclasm had the opposite effect on the priests of the Orthodox Church and monks, many of whom were iconophiles. Leo’s assumption of heightened authority within the church, as well as his persecution of iconophiles, removed a great deal of power from the hands of the priests and monks. The priests of the Orthodox Church believed the destruction of the icons to be a horrible tragedy, and evidence of the lack of spirituality on the part of Leo, as witnessed by Theophanes Confessor’s *Chronicle*. Theophanes viewed Leo’s destructive policy as evidence of his own religious shortcomings, “unable as he was to grasp the argument concerning relative veneration because of his lack of faith and crass ignorance.”

With his frank disapproval of an Emperor, who is supposedly sanctified in his position by God, Theophanes was not alone in his blatant lack of respect for Leo. The common people, as well as a great number of the aristocracy, thought that the icons themselves were of a partially divine nature, with what was depicted lending a part of its sacred nature to the piece itself, and that destroying them was sacrilegious. Religion has no class boundaries, and the Iconophile philosophy extended from rich to poor, powerful to peasant within the empire, with the iconophiles united in their common opposition to iconoclastic policy.

Leo was able to pass on his belief in iconoclasm to his son Constantine V, who in fact increased and hardened pressure on the people to forgo their reliance on icons. Constantine had a successful rule, overall strengthening the empire, but his successor, Leo IV, died when only thirty. This left his wife Irene as regent for their young son Constantine VI, and she was a known Iconophile. By 787 CE she had used her position to reverse the iconoclastic polices that Emperor Leo III had implemented, and she returned the icons to their place of former glory in official policy.

By this time the pressure of constant war had had a vast effect on the makeup of Byzantine culture. There was a shifting from an urban to a rural existence for many of the peoples, as well as the disappearance of the curial class and the emergence of a new middle class of farmer soldiers. As more emphasis was placed on this new class to protect the kingdom, a military aristocracy was born, the Dynatoi. With individual families garnering power in the countryside, the Byzantine Emperors had begun losing the centralized powers that Leo had campaigned so hard to

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29 Theophanes p. 138
30 Gregory p. 197
31 Gregory p. 198 “Irene arranged an ecumenical council to carry out the restoration of ikons and the reversal of imperial policy.” This ecumenical council is known as the Second Council of Nicaea.
achieve. The Iconoclasm had managed to last a few generations beyond Leo III, and was even revived again by Leo V the Armenian in 815 CE. But this is another case in which history has repeated itself. With the death of Emperor Theophilos in 842 CE, his widow Theodora became regent for their son Michael. She restored the icons to official sanction, and Iconoclasm was ended. The Iconophiles were able to see the icons restored to prominence throughout the empire once more, with this restoration lasting to the end of the empire itself.

In the end, the simplest theory for Emperor Leo III's decision to move ahead with his program of Iconoclasm, even though it might endanger the integrity of his empire, is also the most likely; he truly believed in the course of action he was taking for religious reasons. Leo viewed the Arab attacks against Byzantium as God's punishment for people's continued sinning with the icons. When the island of Thera had its volcanic eruption, Leo took it as a sign from God to begin cleansing the empire of these false gods and graven images. Leo truly felt the icons were being worshipped as a form of idolatry, a sin against God. Leo appears to be a fine example of Caesaropapism in action, an Emperor who believes it is his duty and right to maintain not just the worldly issues of the state, but also the affairs of the church as well. Leo believed he was at the head of God's Kingdom on Earth, an autocrat; he acted as he saw fit to ensure the survival of the Empire and the salvation of his subject's souls, despite the great protests of those who disagreed with him. He was willing to bring the turmoil of Iconoclasm to his empire with the hopes that in the fires of burning icons Constantinople would be made pure.

32 Gregory p.209-211 “Theodora's main goal was the restoration of ikons.”
33 Gregory p. 192 “...the most convincing explanation for Leo's action seems to be his own personal belief.”
34 Gregory p. 192 “If Leo already was an Iconoclast, he may well have been moved to act publicly by this event (Thera Eruption)”
35 Theophanes p. 137 “(Leo) Thinking that God's wrath (Thera eruption) was in his favour instead of being directed against him, he stirred up a more ruthless war on the holy and venerable icons...”
36 Gregory p. 192 “...as Emperor, he (Leo) had a responsibility to God and to his subjects to insist on correct religious practice. His own tendency toward autocracy made him act without regard to any opposition...”


Bibliography


