

# BYZANTINE ORTHODOXIES

Papers from the Thirty-sixth Spring Symposium  
of Byzantine Studies, University of Durham,  
23–25 March 2002

edited by  
Andrew Louth and Augustine Casiday

**ASHGATE**  
**VARIORUM**

## The British Museum Triumph of Orthodoxy icon

Dimitra Kotoula

The British Museum Triumph of Orthodoxy icon (late fourteenth century) is the earliest known pictorial representation of the restoration of the holy icons, a feast first celebrated on 11 March 843 and commemorated by the Orthodox Church since then on the first Sunday of Lent. The purpose of this article is to present and discuss the iconography of the British Museum icon, proposing new ways of interpreting it.

The icon of Orthodoxy is a relatively small (39 x 31cm) panel divided into two horizontal zones (see frontispiece).<sup>1</sup> Central to its iconography is the icon of the Virgin with Child in the upper register supported by two angels and flanked, according to the surviving inscriptions, by the Empress Theodora together with her young son, Emperor Michael III, on the left and the Patriarch Methodios with three monks on the right. In the middle of the lower zone, just below the Virgin with Child complex, Theophanes the Confessor and Theodore the Stoudite are depicted jointly holding an image of Christ. Five of the eleven figures in this zone are identified by severely effaced inscriptions. St Theodosia, the only female saint, is depicted holding an icon of Christ-Emmanuel while the bishop on the right and his companion must be the two Graptoi Brothers, Theodore

<sup>1</sup> I am most indebted to my supervisor Prof. R. Cormack and to Prof. M. Vassilaki for their comments and suggestions concerning this article as well as to Prof. A. Louth for his most kind proposal to include it in the present volume. For the most recent publication of the Orthodoxy icon, see A. Weyl-Carr, 'Icon with the Triumph of Orthodoxy', in H.C. Evans, ed., *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557) Exhibition Catalogue* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 154–5; R. Cormack, 'Icon of the Triumph of Orthodoxy', in M. Vassilaki, ed., *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art* (Milan: Skira, 2000), 340, no. 32. See also R. Cormack, 'Icon of the Triumph of Orthodoxy', in D. Buckton, ed., *Byzantium* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), 129–30, no. 140 and R. Cormack, 'Women and Icons and Women in Icons', in Liz James, ed., *Women, Men and Eunuchs* (London: Routledge, 1997), 25–27 fn. 8, where all the previous bibliography on the icon is cited.

From *Byzantine Orthodoxies*, eds Andrew Louth and Augustine Casiday. Copyright © 2006 by the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies. Published by Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Gower House, Croft Road, Aldershot, Hampshire, GU11 3HR, Great Britain.

and Theophanes. Finally, the sixth and the seventh figures are inscribed as St Theophylaktos and Anatholios. The identification of the latter depicted is further helped by a recently discovered, post-Byzantine (c. 1800) copy of the British Museum icon!<sup>1</sup> Its publisher, N. Chirakolis, identifies the first of the three monks in the upper zone as Bishop Theodoros and the fourth figure from the left in the lower zone as St Isidore.

The Defending icon commemorates the triumph of the true faith (Orthodoxy) *(ἀλήθειαν)*. Its iconography, mainly that of the upper register, has been related to canonical representations or to depictions of the veneration and the procession of the Hagia Sophia icon, in particular in cycles of the Akathistos Hymn.<sup>2</sup> Both in iconography and in the Defending icon shares with these scenes specific and important characteristics. These characteristics, however, may also refer to the historical events and the liturgical practices that took place on 11 March 843.

In the text of the *Liké* of St Theod. Symeon and George of Laodicea, there is preserved a detailed account of the celebrations held at the Blachernai church which officially declared the restoration of the holy icons on that day. The anonymous author of the *Liké* centres his description on the 'all-holy icon of our Lord and of the Mother of God who bore him' which, at the end of a vigil, was carried on the initiative of Patriarch Methodios, and in the presence of the Empress Theodora and of the Holy Fathers, in a public ceremonial procession. The procession moved from the Blachernai church to Hagia Sophia (where a special liturgy took place) and, finally, in the palace via the Chalke Gate.<sup>3</sup> The text, very likely a compilation of the eleventh century or later, was known to late Byzantines; it is preserved only in a late fourteenth century manuscript. The period to which the icon of Orthodoxy is also dated.<sup>4</sup> The critical examination of the *Liké* of the icon of the Hagia Sophia in the public life of the capital from the thirteenth century must have influenced the introduction into the iconography of a theme in which the role of icons in procession, and of an icon of the

<sup>1</sup> N. Chirakolis, *Icons: The Victoria Collection* (London: British Museum, 1986), no. 47, pp. 5.

<sup>2</sup> V. Pavlou-Servolis, 'Icons in the Liturgy', *DOP* 41 (1987), 61; V. Pavlou-Servolis, 'Service of the Holy Icon', in C. Moss and S. Lamb, eds., *Byzantine East-West: An Historical Study in Honor of Ruth M. Schwab* (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1992), 80-4.

<sup>3</sup> BGC 494, I. Vasilakis (trans.), 'An engraving in Decalis: Synaxaria of Greek Orthodox in Leeds', *AnalM* 10 (1985), 43. In C. Moss and S. Lamb, eds., *Byzantine East-West: An Historical Study in Honor of Ruth M. Schwab* (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1992), 80-4.

<sup>4</sup> M. Chirakolis, *Icons: The Victoria Collection* (London: British Museum, 1986), 122.

<sup>5</sup> M. Chirakolis, *Icons: The Victoria Collection* (London: British Museum, 1986), 122.

Theodoros Protoprotonotarios in particular, appears to have been central at least as early as the middle Byzantine period.<sup>5</sup>

A processional ceremony – as the most important part of the celebrations for the restoration of the holy icons in 843 is also mentioned in the *Notitia* of Anatholios Theophilos, a text which, of all the early sources on the event, is the closest one to the iconography of the British Museum icon. Its anonymous author does not identify a particular scene with it and mentions Hagia Sophia and not the Blachernai church as the only place for the celebrations on the day, but clearly records that

The Empress Theodora called the most holy Patriarch Methodios to reform and gather every single Orthodox, bishops and archbishops and monks and monks and the laity, to the Great Church on the first Sunday of Lent building crosses and icons and, when that was done and a vast crowd of people did gather in the Great Church, the Empress Michael herself along with his mother went there each one holding a candle in their hands and, having joined the Holy Patriarch and the crowd, processed together with their hands joining the Holy Icons in their hands over their head, from the holy sanctuary of the Great Church to the imperial gate of Blachernai.<sup>6</sup>

A procession from the Blachernai church to Hagia Sophia in the presence of the Empress Theodora, but without icons, is mentioned as the central part of the ceremonial commemoration for the restoration of the holy icons in 843 in the tenth-century text of the *Liké* of St Irene of Chrysobolantia, as well as by Geovonik and Theophanes Continuatus.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, in the majority of the later sources, from the eleventh century onwards, the central role of the icons and of the emperor in the commemorative celebrations in 843 as well as in those performed by the Byzantines on the day of Orthodoxy event since are strongly emphasized; however, no procession with the participation of a cross is mentioned:

<sup>1</sup> For the icon of the Hagia Sophia, see Ch. Angelidis, T. Papadimitrakis, 'The Veneration of the Virgin (Theotokos) and the Holy Motherhood', in *Stavros*, *Notes of Guy*, 273-281.

<sup>2</sup> *Notitia* of Anatholios Theophilos in H. Magu, *Antique Byzantine Sources* 50 (Paris, 1996), 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> BGC 492, 448-51, 402-403 and 123. Kassanika, *On the Day of the Holy Icons of Chrysobolantia* (Igorika Upravitno Izdatstvo, 1980), 5-4. *Gen. Rec.* 64, *Thess. Conv.* IV, 18, 49-51.

<sup>4</sup> This is the case, for example, in the history of Dukak, vol. 2, 103; Syllabus II, Theodoros, ed. George Sphakios, *Synaxis Hagiastikon* (Bibliotheca de Caesariensis), 103 and 104 and in the anonymous history (anonymous), *Hagiastikon* 103, 120-15. It is in P. Paleokrassos' description of the ceremony, however, that a crowd of monks as well as of clergy and of people is mentioned, *AnalM* 7, 227-28. The above sources in which the latter plays a central role challenge the discussion on the icon of the Shrine of Anatholios Theophilos as an engraving by Anatholios Theophilos, *Life of St. David*, in *Talbot*, *Debetus*, 222-23, 249. For all sources on the text see BGC 1386-1391.

By that time the loss of Orthodoxy must have attained, apart from its strong historical character, a more liturgical-symbolic meaning.

According to the anonymous *Notitia* of Anatholios Theophilos already cited above, the processional celebration on the day of Orthodoxy in 843 started from the holy icons of the Great Church. The tenth-century description of Constantine Porphyrogenetos as to how the feast was to be celebrated by the Byzantines mentions commemorations which included a vigil at the Blachernai church and a procession to the church of Hagia Sophia, and ended with a special liturgical act which took place in the holy icons of the same church and included, among other liturgical practices, an imperial ceremonial proclamation of the poster which covered the holy altar.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, from the eleventh century onwards the feast of Orthodoxy was called the exaltation, the dedication of a new church – a ceremony in which both the holy icons and the altar were principal elements – and was incorporated as such in the monastic *Tropika*.<sup>9</sup>

The iconographic system, meaning of the most strongly retained in the British Museum icon is what brings its iconography closer to the Hagia Sophia series of the veneration of the Hagia Sophia icon as depicted in the Akathistos Hymn cycles than to any other contemporary depiction of the same theme. The seal and the puke are two central iconographic elements strongly emphasized in the Mother of God with Child complex in the British Museum icon of Orthodoxy. The puke, in particular, the presence of which intensifies the liturgical meaning of the iconography, since it is the traditional covering tissue of the altar of the holy icons, is usually absent from depictions of the procession or the veneration of the Hagia Sophia icon – other than those included in the Akathistos Hymn cycles (e.g., those of the Blachernai monastery near Atrá (1296), the Haralambos palace cod. 78. A. fol. 39v; *Fig.* 1), about 1381, or the Moscow State Historical Museum *trifido*, 1688).<sup>10</sup> However, it dominates the scene in the representations of the theme, mainly in the cycles of the Akathistos Hymn, sides 23 and 24, in all the surviving relevant illuminated manuscripts as well as in the fourteenth-century fresco decoration of the Serbian monuments of Dubrovnik (1348), Matejić (1355/60), and of the

<sup>1</sup> A. Vagg, ed., *Constantine Porphyrogenetos, as seen in a mirror* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1977-89), 1-192.

<sup>2</sup> J. Guillard, *Le Synexaire de l'Orthodoxie*, *Travaux de l'Institut* 1 (1967), 134-6; *Monks, Le Typikon de la Grande Eglise* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), 473, B. 386.

<sup>3</sup> M. Adamantios-Pantelinos, 'The Byzantine wall-paintings of the Blachernai monastery near Atrá', *Archiv für Byzantinische Geschichte und Forschung* (Athens, 1981), 1, 4-24; N. Panagiotopoulos, 'Adoration of the icon of Virgin Theotokos', in *Stavros*, ed. Anatholios Theophilos, *Notes of Guy*, 273-281; M. Chirakolis, *Icons of the Mother of God*, in *Stavros*, ed. *Notes of Guy*, 273-281.

Matka Manastir (1376/77 or 1380/81)<sup>11</sup> (see Fig. 2). The presence of a bishop honoring the Mother of God icon with a crown or standing in prospectus in front of it, and of members of the imperial family in the majority of the aforementioned representations, intensify even further the links between the iconography of the Akathistos Hymn cycles and the British Museum icon of Orthodoxy, since it attests in particular to the representation of side 24 in the fresco cycle of the Akathistos Hymn in the recent paintings of Dubrovnik.<sup>12</sup> It is worth mentioning here that the actual seal of the church of Orthodoxy served as an intermediary prayer for the salvation of the souls of the commemorated iconophile emperor and saints. Likewise, in the Akathistos Hymn side 24 the Mother of God is called to act as an intercessor for salvation.<sup>13</sup>

The identification of the saints depicted in the Orthodoxy icon may support even further the liturgical character of its iconography, as well as its link with the commemorative celebrations and the events during the council of 843. First, Patriarch Methodios, to whom a prominent place was given in the British Museum icon, played an instrumental role in the restoration of the holy icons. In the text of the *Liké* of St Irene of Chrysobolantia and of St Theodora the Empress, his role in the council, along with that of Isidore and Anatholios, is particularly emphasized.<sup>14</sup> According to J. Guillard, the first version of the Synexaire of Orthodoxy was written by him, and he is mentioned in the sources as the author of a hymn commemorating the day of Orthodoxy in which he is clearly referring to the historical events of 843.<sup>15</sup> An important version of the *Liké* of St Theophanes the Confessor is also attributed to 1222 and under his initiative the relics of St Theodora the Martyr were transferred to

<sup>1</sup> For manuscript illustrations, see V.D. Likhachev, 'The Distribution of the Great Manuscript of the Akathistos Hymn (Moscow, State Historical Museum, Synexaire) 429', *DOP* 20 (1972), 235-42 and V.D. Likhachev, *Synaxis Hagiastikon* (Moscow: Institute, 1977), 86, 154-61; for the Moscow State Historical Museum cod. 69, fol. 39v, 21. Before the *Synaxis Hagiastikon* cod. 69 (1972) and recently (N. Chirakolis, *Icons*, 123-40) for the Berlin palace (Pantelinos, *Byzantine Synexaire* cod. 78, A. fol. 39v) and V. Pavlou-Servolis, 'Icons in the Liturgy', *DOP* 41 (1987), 61. For the Tond public Museum, *Byzantine Historical Museum* (Moscow, 1978), 44-46. For the representation of mural painting, see A. Dlabal, *Die Kirchenmalerei* (in *Byzantinische Forschungen*), 120-40; for the Blachernai Synexaire (Hymn), *Archiv für Byzantinische Geschichte und Forschung* (Athens, 1981), 1, 4-24; for the Dubrovnik, *Fig.* 2, 3, 4; *AnalM*, *Fig.* 79, 84, 127. *Byzantine Synexaire*.

<sup>2</sup> G. Bellis, 'The Synexaire of the Pope', in T. J. Brown, ed., *Manual of the Ministry of the Bishop*, *Antiquity and Modern Hungary* (Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1988), 180-183.

<sup>3</sup> E. Michail, 'The Akathistos Hymn (Chrysobolantia)', 1975, 96.

<sup>4</sup> BGC 492, 448-51, 402-403 and 123; M. Vasilev, *Life of Saint Theodora the Empress*, in *Talbot*, *Debetus*, 222.

<sup>5</sup> J. Guillard, *Travaux de l'Institut de Byzantine* (Paris, 1967), 134-35 (1967), 372-403 (1967).



Constantinople in 844.<sup>14</sup> Both saints have a prominent place in the iconography of the British Museum panel.

St Theodora is the only saint of those identified so far who is not directly connected with the events of 843 and the icon of Orthodoxy. However, the representation of her holding the icon of Christ-Emmanuel strongly alludes not only to the protection of this icon by the saint at the end of her life but, especially, to the Chalke Gate where the icon hung and through which the holy liturgical procession passed on the day of the restoration of the holy icons in 843.<sup>15</sup> The icon of Christ-Emmanuel, which is depicted twice in the Orthodoxy icon, is furthermore commemorated in one of the most important of the formulae of the feast.<sup>16</sup> The *hymnology* was sung by fervent iconophiles such as Stephen the Younger and Theodosius the Studite.<sup>17</sup>

All the other saints depicted in the Triumph of Orthodoxy icon were venerated not only as defenders of the holy images but also for their crucial contribution to the historical events that led to the restoration of the holy icons in 843, e.g., Isidore and Amalric in particular.<sup>18</sup> Theophylaktos, a monk of the Agauri monastery, was a disciple of Isidore, but his presence in the Orthodoxy icon is further explained by the fact that, according to the Constantinian Paphlagonian Book of Genesis, the feast on the day of Orthodoxy ended with a ceremonial procession at the chapel of St Theophylaktos.<sup>19</sup>

Of the other saints depicted, Theophanes the Great wrote a liturgical hymn on the day of the restoration of the holy icons which proved crucial for the development of the Orthodoxy icon and in which he is referring to the 'icon and the church of the Mother of God' where the celebrations on 11 March 843 took place.<sup>20</sup> While usually the saint is depicted as a monk, in the Skylitzis manuscript alone he is depicted as a bishop confronting the iconoclastic court of Theophilos and the emperor himself.<sup>21</sup> Although

<sup>14</sup> RIC 1985.

<sup>15</sup> RIC 1774; N. Gamba, 'Life of Saint Theodora of Constantinople', in Tallon, *Orthodox*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> A. Bevan, *Ungarische Geschichte* (Leipzig & Chemnitz, 1915), 107–108.

<sup>17</sup> RG 380.125a and 34.1; *Aspilogi*, Le Vie d'Étienne le Jeune par Étienne de Thessalonique, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, 1976, 159–160, 162.

<sup>18</sup> M. Vassil, 'Life of St Theodora', in Tallon, *Orthodox*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Vogt, *op. cit.*, Le jour de l'Orthodoxie, 1, 180. For the close relationship of the saint with Isidore, see D. F. Sullivan, 'Life of St Isidore', in Tallon, *Orthodox*, 104 and 107.

<sup>20</sup> J. Gouillard, *Deux figures* (Paris, 1981), 30–64; Gouillard, *Theophanes*, 23–29.

<sup>21</sup> A. Gauthier and M. Simeonides, 'L'Iconoclasme de Théophile de Skylitzis et la liturgie orthodoxe à Constantinople', in *Revue des études byzantines* (Paris), 1979, 83–91.

Theodore and not his father Theophanes in the second bishop depicted in the Orthodoxy icon, we consider that this iconography is reminiscent of the relevant illustrations of the Skylitzis manuscript and thus, consequently, of the defence of the orthodox faith by the Holy Fathers during the council of 843.

This historical context must have deeply interested Byzantines in the fourteenth century, when the British Museum icon is dated. The middle years of the late Byzantine period were torn by the debate over Hesychasm and the relationship with the West. During the councils of 1341, 1351 and particularly 1355, which like the celebrations after the earlier one in 843 were held in the Blachernai church, the Synodikon of Orthodoxy was finally crystallized and signed.<sup>22</sup> Hesychasm was accepted at last as a true Orthodox doctrine. During all that period the questions posed and the theological-cultural issues central to the iconoclastic controversy remained open and were vividly discussed. In fact, Byzantine icons were venerated more fervently. For fear of the errors depicted in the Orthodoxy icon we have clear evidence that they, as fervent iconophiles, were of great interest to the Byzantines of the fourteenth century. The healing cult of St Theodora's relics flourished and a lengthy *enkainismos* was written praising the faith of the female iconophile saint.<sup>23</sup> In the fourteenth century, Mikhaïlos Choumras composed an *encomion* on Theodora the Studite, the 'great defender of the images during iconoclasm'.<sup>24</sup> Theodora Palaiologina wrote the *Life of the Great Mother*, Theodora and Theophanes, in the late thirteenth century. By comparing her mother's struggle to influence Andronikos II against the order of the church and the torture of her two brothers with the famous martyrdom of the Great Mother, Theodora eloquently proves that in the consciousness of the Byzantines of the late period, their still and consequently their depiction here clear up to date allusions.<sup>25</sup>

St Isidore and Paterich Methodios in particular were honored as the 'true defenders of the Holy Trinity' according to the text of the *Life of Saint Isidore* and of Saint Theodora the Ensign, while central to their anti-iconoclastic activities were the dogmas both of the incarnation and of the trinitarian nature of God.<sup>26</sup> In the iconophile saints depicted in the British Museum icon, the late Byzantine vision venerated not only the

<sup>22</sup> J. Gouillard, *Synodikon*, 108–12.

<sup>23</sup> M. Gamba, 'Life of St Theodora', in Tallon, *Orthodox*, 1–7, esp. 3.

<sup>24</sup> RG 1796a.

<sup>25</sup> A. H. Tallon, 'The icon in the life of the Holy Trinity in the Palaiologan period', in D. Cutler, ed. and D. Mervin, *The Triumph of Byzantine Christianity* (London, University Press, 1980), 26.

<sup>26</sup> H. F. Sakellari, 'Life of St Isidore', in Tallon, *Orthodox*, 104 and 106 and M. Vassil, 'Life of St Theodora', in Tallon, *Orthodox*, 27.

main characteristics of the restoration of the holy icons, but also the most true confessions of the Orthodox dogma of the Holy Trinity – a crucial issue in fourteenth-century theological debates and central to the dialogue with the Western Church that further reveals the vital relevance that the iconography of the Triumph of Orthodoxy icon had for late Byzantium.



FIGURE 1. Fragment of the restoration of the Orthodoxy icon, *Hariton Painter* 116, around 1300. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett, 78 A 5. After Vassilaki, *op. cit.*, *Museum of Cost.*, 309, fig. 50.



Figure 2 The Akathistos Hymn oikos 24, Markov Monastir, last quarter of the fourteenth century (after Vasselaki, ed., *Mother of God*, 135 fig. 81)