

# WRITING IN GOLD

BYZANTINE SOCIETY AND ITS ICONS

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of these contrasts comes when the saint dies while the emperor is feasting at the pagan festival of the Broumalia (one of the festivals specifically banned in canon 62 of the Quinisext Council). The profane and sacred ways of life are seen as opposites, and the attempt is made to connect anything profane with heresy. The emphasis on all these oppositions is more than a literary device; it shows how the dispute about icons was associated with a number of other alignments and contrasts.

A third pointer to the areas of conflict during the iconoclast period comes from the description of dress. Clothing appears as an index of spiritual life and the identifying sign of the monk's habit features in several episodes in the saint's career. When a monk was stripped of his distinctive clothing the iconoclasts believed that he was at the same time transformed into an ordinary citizen. Attacks on monks included the burning of their beards and the removal of their black habits. The visual importance of dress has already been observed in the perception of St Theodore of Sykeon. Yet there may be another element here. When the writer suggests that the removal of the outward signs of a monk's dress will also remove his character *as a monk*, we are reminded of the confusion on the part of both sides in the iconoclast controversy as to the status of images: was there, or was there not, something inherently holy in the painted image of a saint? Did the signifier have the properties associated with the signified? It is interesting to note that such issues were not restricted to the perception of icons, but found a focus also in other areas of external display.

The *Life of St Stephen the Younger* transmits a version of the Iconoclasm of the eighth century as a series of perceived oppositions in society, at a time of strong imperial authority and control. But it does not answer the question why Byzantines might opt for one side or another. In the case of monks, their adoption of the iconophile side followed the seventh-century perception of icons as a channel for intercession with God. But why should anyone in Byzantium after more than a century of propaganda for the power of icons, articulated by monks and the clergy, join the iconoclast party? This touches on the problem of how an individual can suddenly change apparently fundamental religious beliefs. Although some examples of changing sides might superficially be taken as opportunism—conformity with imperial authority as a means of furthering social ambitions—or as provoked by the fear of becoming a dissident, taking this decision must have depended on the whole range of circumstances of the time. Times of social and political disturbance and change send their shock waves through previously stable religious beliefs.

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A second text which brings out the place of icons in the perceptions of the period is a historically bizarre document that dates from the end of the conflict. It is set out as the formulation of an enormous church council which took place in Islamic-occupied Jerusalem; its authors describe themselves as the loyal subjects of a pious and orthodox emperor.

It records their irrefutable case for the veneration of icons and it is addressed to the attention of a notorious iconoclast emperor and persecutor of iconophiles. The original letter, so our copy claims, was sent to the emperor headed with a painted portrait icon of the Virgin and Child. All the evidence is that the *Letter* is a careful Byzantine fake from the years around 843 at the end of Iconoclasm and that the 'original letter' never existed.

The text is now known from two manuscripts, one dating from the ninth century and the other from the twelfth. It certainly existed in the wording in which we find it by the ninth century. The only modern edition of the text was produced in 1864. It will be treated in some detail because it has never been introduced into the study of Iconoclasm and it is central to the argument of the perception of icons in Byzantium.

In outline the *Letter of the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem to the Emperor Theophilus in the year 836* argues the case for icons in a preface and fifteen sections, of which the longest is a list of famous miraculous icons. The council it purports to record met in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in April 836, and its authority depended on the size of its membership: three patriarchs, 185 bishops, 17 abbots and 1153 monks. The first seven sections argue the case in favour of icons from the point of view of church history, starting with the incarnation of Christ on earth known from the writings of the Gospels and from pictorial representations of his life. The Christian community was put under the care of God's chosen emperors, helped by priests; church councils confirmed their combined decisions. Constantine the Great was the central figure in the definition of correct practice and belief; he put an image of Christ on his coins and icons in his churches, and the Church Fathers justified his acts. Icons had in any case already existed from the beginning of Christianity, and their veneration had been implied by the Old Testament from the time of Moses. A list of icons, some of which date from the time of Christ, proves both their historical existence and their miraculous powers. The final seven sections of the *Letter* are in general less theological. They state first that a distinction is to be drawn between 'images' and 'idols', but point out that this is in fact a dead issue, already eliminated by the early church. More centrally these chapters argue that Iconoclasm is a heresy; orthodox emperors must imitate models like the fourth-century emperors Constantine and Theodosios. Specific incidents in recent years prove, it is claimed, that God disapproves of Iconoclasm; to declare his anger at the banning of images God has sent all the miseries of human life which are deserved by human error and sin. The text closes with a prayer for divine favour for the emperor Theophilus.

This text opens up many possibilities for study. It reveals no doubt a great talent for wishful thinking; yet within it is a core of assumptions through which we can approach the world of the ninth-century writer and his audience. Some of these can be explored briefly here.

In the first half of the text, the largely theological sections, the most important material for us is less the logic in favour of the production and veneration of icons than the specific examples chosen to illustrate

*40 The reproduction of multiple copies of icons must have been a feature of the years leading up to Iconoclasm and in later centuries the needs of the Orthodox church must have called for the production of far greater numbers of icons for churches, monasteries and homes. This representation of a Russian artist's workshop in the seventeenth century suggests the mass production of icons of the Virgin and Child, a reflection of the fact that the failure of Iconoclasm led ultimately to the excessive, if theologically legitimate, production of icons.*

the case. One such example concerned the use of representational art by Constantine the Great: he produced, it is claimed, a coin (nomisma) on which he put not only the cross which appeared to him as a sign in the sky, but also a representation of Christ in human form together with himself. The text explains the message of this combined representation as demonstrating the concord between the ruler of Heaven and the ruler of earth. In fact, this example is a fiction; no such coin was ever minted by Constantine. But, as a fiction, it reveals the importance of the appeal to tradition, and to earlier Christian emperors, as part of the arguments against Iconoclasm.

The text moves on to record the decoration of churches with icons, and insists that the apostles, before they wrote the Gospels, had already painted churches with pictures and mosaics showing Christ in human form



and the narrative of his life on earth. Again, of course, this is pure fiction; but again it reveals the strength of the example of the past within the controversy over icons. The practice of the apostles formed, we may suppose, even more convincing a case than that of Constantine (the early church is seen as being as prolific in producing icons as Russia became in the seventeenth century; Figure 40).

The nucleus of the *Letter* is the list of twelve images which are quoted as the practical visual proof of the existence of icons going back to the time of Christ and sanctioned by him as well as by their divine powers. Many of these were famous images in the ninth century and most, it seems, existed then or had done in recent memory—even though the stories told of their miracles and genesis were often sheer invention. Much more convincing than the supposed artistic activity of the apostles, these were the essential, visible witnesses of God's approval for the production and veneration of icons by true Christians. They formed the best evidence that the authors of this letter could find for belief in the power of images. For this reason the list is summarized here, retaining the order of the text and outlining as far as possible the reasons for the inclusion of each image. Later we shall discuss the force of such examples within the arguments against Iconoclasm.

### 1 *The image of Christ at Edessa on a soudarion (cloth)*

This image was an imprint of the face of Christ on a cloth, taken by one of the apostles to the ruler (toparch) of the city of Edessa in Syria, who received baptism into Christianity. It is described as still at Edessa at the time of the *Letter*, and compared with a royal sceptre, in that the signs and miracles associated with it demonstrated the grace of Christ towards the city. Its production was miraculous, recording the appearance of Christ while on earth.

A miracle enacted by this image some centuries later at the time of the Persian advance under Chosroes is also recorded. The city of Edessa was under siege and the walls were set on fire by the enemy. When the orthodox bishop, named Eulalios, saw that the citizens were expecting disaster, he went in procession around the walls with the *soudarion*. The result was spectacular: a miraculous wind which blew the flames towards the enemy and consumed the besiegers instead of the citizens.

The most striking feature of this image is that it was made directly from the body of Christ. Although in the ninth century it existed primarily as a visual image, the story of its creation stresses the physical contact with the holy body. Moreover, for the iconophile case, it provided superb ammunition: for Christ himself created this image, thus confirming his approval of the display of his portraits.

This particular image was, in fact, famous for many centuries. It entered history in the sixth century, and was soon to be described as the image on the *mandylion*, a term for the cloth that was used in Byzantium in preference to the earlier title of *soudarion*. It enjoyed such popularity that it seems to have become normal for every Byzantine church to include a replica of it in some form (as in Cyprus in the twelfth century; Figure 41). By the tenth century imperial favour had brought

the original object to Constantinople, where it was lodged in a chapel of the palace. The *mandylion* was finally acquired by the French during the Crusader occupation of the city in the thirteenth century and taken to the Sainte Chapelle in Paris. It seems almost certain that it was lost during the French Revolution, although attempts have been made (without success) to identify it with the well known 'Turin Shroud'.

41 For the iconophiles the existence of a group of images supposed to be miraculously produced, and not the manufacture of mere artists, naturally formed a key argument against the iconoclast claim that figural images were not endorsed by God. Of these images 'not made by human hands', one of the most famous was the mandylion of Edessa—it was thought to be the direct imprint of the face of the living Christ on a cloth. In the tenth century, after Iconoclasm, the image was brought to the Great Palace in Constantinople, and a painted copy of it was included as a standard image in any church decoration. This rendering comes from a twelfth-century church on Cyprus.

2 *The image of the Virgin at Lydda*

The apostles Peter and John were said to have built with their own hands a church at Lydda (or Diospolis) in Palestine and to have dedicated it to the Mother of God. They prayed to the Virgin to come to its dedication. She answered their prayer with a miracle: her form was found imprinted on one of the columns of the church.

Later, in the fourth century, the pagan emperor Julian (361–3) sent two Jewish painters to investigate this image. They found the form of the Virgin on one of the columns, a full-length figure wearing a purple garment and ornaments, and so life-like as to seem to be able to see and talk. They tried with their tools to take it off the column but however deeply they cut into the marble, the image (we are told) remained as clear as before, if not more so.

This story not only provides an example of a figural image in a church in the time of the apostles, but more strikingly it demonstrates the power of the image to resist attack, even when confronted with the scepticism of a pagan emperor and his Jewish assistants. Again no artist was involved, but the Virgin herself created the image.



### 3 *The icon of the Virgin painted by St Luke*

The third icon listed is an icon of the Virgin supposedly painted from life by St Luke, in order to leave a record of the Virgin's form for posterity. She was delighted with his work and exclaimed when she saw it, 'My grace will be with it'.

The origin of this icon differs from that of the first two. It was not formed by the Virgin herself, but by a human painter in the person of St Luke. However, a close connection with the divine is retained, for the Virgin is said to have sat for the painting and to have approved it. This at once serves to legitimate the activity of human icon-painters. Moreover the role of Luke as painter is not without significance. As a writer of inspired scripture he was recognized by all Christians as a vessel of the word of God; he could hardly lose that status when he turned to painting. Painting could also be the 'Word of God'.

The belief that St Luke was also a painter became common and at least one icon kept in Constantinople was later attributed to his hand. Even today this notion still flourishes. Yet it probably originated no earlier than the period of Iconoclasm, when the status of painting was most seriously called into question. In fact the text of the *Letter* contains one of the earliest references to St Luke as a painter.

### 4 *A miraculous image of the Virgin at Lydda*

After St Peter had cured a paralytic man called Ainea, the grateful patient was said to have built a church with his own hands at Lydda, dedicated to the Virgin. He was helped by seventy disciples of Christ, and the church was near to completion when the Jews and the pagans tried to obtain it for themselves. To settle the dispute they asked the local governor to arbitrate. He said he would lock up the building, seal the doors for three days and guard it. Then it would be reopened and given to those who could point to a sign of their faith inside. At the end of the three days the doors were opened and in the western part of the church was found a female figure, three cubits in height, wearing purple, and inscribed with the following letters: MARIA, THE MOTHER OF THE KING, CHRIST OF NAZARETH.

The governor asked whose image and inscription it was, and the Jews and pagans had no option but to give the church to the disciples. Numerous miracles were attributed to the image—devils driven out, the sick cured, and lepers healed.

This story demonstrates the constructive power of images in propagating the Christian faith. It reveals indeed an early Christian community being dependent on an image of the Virgin for its public identification; the only way, that is, that the governor could distinguish the Christians from the Jews and pagans was by means of a visible symbol which incorporated both words and image. It thus implicitly makes the claim that Christians of the ninth century should display their faith through icons.

### 5 *A mosaic icon of the Virgin and Child on Cyprus*

This image was a mosaic in a village in the south of the island of Cyprus

in a church dedicated to the Virgin; the mosaic was a representation of the Virgin and Child. One day an Arab shot an arrow into the mosaic striking the knee of the Virgin on which the Child in her arms was seated; immediately blood flowed out in a stream pouring down to her feet. The icon was still in the church at the time of writing the text.

This story stresses the clash between an Arab and an image. As in the last example it is an icon which forms the identifying mark of Christianity and defends the faith against its opponents. Here, however, the opponent goes so far as to attack the image, suggesting (in the terms of the iconophiles) a parallel between iconoclasts and the enemies of Christianity.

This is one of three icons in the list which are said to have bled when wounded. The assumption made that an icon could bleed, like a human body, raises again the issue of the relationship between the image on the icon and its prototype. Although the iconophiles sometimes made a point of distinguishing between the materials of the image and the holy figure represented through them, here the two are conflated. The inanimate image, by bleeding, shows that it contains the properties of the prototype.

#### 6 *A mosaic icon of the Nativity at Bethlehem*

On the western façade of the church of the Mother of God at Bethlehem, Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, set up a mosaic of the Nativity on which was to be seen the Virgin holding the Child in her arms and the adoration of Christ by the Magi. When the Persians invaded Byzantium and Syria and burnt down Jerusalem in the seventh century, taking the patriarch Zacharias prisoner and killing Christians, they came eventually to Bethlehem. Here they saw the representations of the Magi on the front of the church, and because these were shown as Persians and astrologers, they respected the figures as if they were alive; with respect and love for their ancestors, they left the church unharmed. As a result the ancient church was still in existence with its mosaic at the time of the writing of this text.

Once again the image in this story appears as a supernatural defender of Christianity, keeping the church safe from the Persians. Yet here the context is different. The icon is associated not with scriptural characters, but with the renowned Helena—the mother of the first Christian emperor and a woman reputed to have found the True Cross of Christ. The patronage of icons is thus linked to a heroine of the early history of Byzantium.

Part of this story is historical. Jerusalem did fall in 614; but there is no reason to connect Helena with any decoration of the church of the Mother of God (now called the church of the Nativity) as it was in the seventh century. The church then standing on the site was built almost two centuries after the death of Helena around 330.

#### 7 *The image of the Virgin at Alexandria*

A prefect of Alexandria customarily mocked and insulted a holy icon



of the Mother of God which was in the courtyard of the Great Church of that city. One day when he was alone there and fully awake (that is, not in a dream), the Virgin herself appeared to him, accompanied, he claimed, by two eunuchs. They held his hands and feet and stretched them and she tore apart his limbs with her holy finger; his arms came apart at his elbows and his feet at his ankles, just as leaves fall from a fig tree.

The next paragraph of the text probably refers to the same icon. Another man, who had likewise abused the icon of the Virgin, once found himself pursued by soldiers and went for asylum to the holy icon of the Virgin. The icon of the Virgin, in the sight of all, turned away from him and so delivered him for slaughter like a traitor.

The point of these stories is straightforward: the Virgin protects her own icons and is no doubt waiting to wreak terrible vengeance on the iconoclasts.

### 8 *An icon of Christ*

A man maliciously threw a stone at a holy icon of Christ. Straightaway a dove flew out of his mouth and a crow flew in; that is, the man now had inside him a black devil instead of the holy spirit and he experienced darkness instead of light—he went blind.

Once more vengeance is taken upon an iconoclast, this time we must assume by Christ himself.

### 9 *An icon of Christ at Berytus*

A Jew stabbed the icon of Christ at Berytus in its side with his spear—like the Jews at the time of the Crucifixion—and a stream of blood gushed forth. Since then this blood has caused many miraculous healings of the blind and lame and of those with other diseases.

This story is one of the most popular stories of a miraculous icon and is found in other texts. Its inclusion in this list serves to raise once again the issue of the relationship between image and prototype.

### 10 *The Holy Well in St Sophia at Constantinople*

The church of St Sophia at Constantinople contained among its relics the well-head on which Christ supposedly sat when he talked to the Samaritan woman. Beside this was an icon of Christ. A Jew stabbed the figure of Christ on the icon in the heart with a knife whereupon streams of blood spurted out so that his face and clothes were spattered. In alarm he threw the icon into the well, but thereupon all the water in the well turned red. Scared that he would be taken for a murderer because of the blood on his clothes, the Jew confessed what he had done. The icon was recovered from the well, but it still had the dagger in the chest of Christ and blood still poured out. The Jew was converted to Christianity by his experience.

This story combines several of the themes that have already emerged from this list. It justifies the use of icons by appealing to their closeness to Christ, their supernatural qualities, the dangers of attacking them and their efficacy in gaining converts. This last element was no doubt

meant to suggest to the iconoclast that it was not too late to change his mind.

In this story the text has moved to Constantinople. The incident was famous among the legends of St Sophia, though later the icon was described as representing the Virgin and Child. The version here is the earliest known.

### 11 *An icon of Christ from the patriarchal palace of St Sophia at Constantinople*

This story is of the miraculous rescue of an icon from iconoclast Constantinople and its subsequent powers. The icon was of Christ and was kept in the patriarchal palace next to St Sophia until the outbreak of Iconoclasm under Leo III. Then the patriarch Germanos took the icon out of his palace and put it in the sea, saying, 'Lord, Lord, save yourself and us who are being destroyed.' The icon floated all the way from Constantinople over the sea to Rome, and despite the salty water stayed dry and upright, just as Christ did when walking on the water. Pope Gregory received the icon, as if he were Simeon receiving the Christ Child at the time of the Presentation, and placed the icon in the church of St Peter. At the time of writing the *Letter* there were still said to be traces of salt at the bottom of the panel. The icon in Rome caused miraculous healings, especially of the blind and paralysed.

This story emphasizes that icons were more than pieces of wood. Although this icon did not bleed, it was likened by other means to the person of Christ—it walked on the water and was received into the temple.

The mention of names allows the period to which the story refers to be dated between 726 and 730, but what exactly gave rise to the story is more obscure. This account is the earliest version of a story which became very popular.

### 12 *The icon of St Andrew on Lemnos*

The last item is an icon of a saint on the Aegean island of Lemnos. This was a portrait icon of the apostle St Andrew in a church dedicated to him in the south part of the island; it was placed in the ciborium over the altar in the sanctuary (like the icon of Figure 18). One of the priests under the influence of madness brought on by a wicked demon mutilated the right eye of the portrait of St Andrew with the knife designed for dividing the bread of the eucharist. The priest immediately suffered divine retribution, and his own right eye jumped out of its socket and stuck into the gouged-out hole in the icon.

The miracle described here claims instant divine protection for an icon. This kind of mutilation was a notorious feature of the iconoclast period and the last iconoclast patriarch, John the Grammarian, is recorded as removing the eyes of an icon which he found in the monastery in which he was detained after the end of Iconoclasm in 843. The story suggests very sharply that those who indulge in activities of this kind will be visited by divine retribution.

The list of twelve images in the *Letter* is followed by a final section of extravagant defence of the church, which had fought to establish the difference between idolatry and veneration. Iconoclasm is characterized as another heresy against which orthodoxy had to battle—like Arianism, the major dispute about the nature of Christ which exercised the early church. Emperors are named who supported monks and decorated churches. The emperor Theodosios I (379–95) is chosen as an example and an object attributed to his patronage forms the subject of one story recalled in the text. This was a liturgical paten, the dish used in the eucharist to hold the bread, and this special one was decorated with the Communion of the Apostles, as were two which have survived from the sixth century (Figures 7–9). Under the iconoclast patriarch Antony (821–837), the dish was used by Theodore, a priest of the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, to hold his signed agreement of support for Iconoclasm during his election as a bishop. The patriarch was required to prove his beliefs by stamping on the paten, which he readily did. Divine retribution soon came to both iconoclasts: Theodore died prematurely and the patriarch suffered a long wasting illness.

More ninth-century stories against Iconoclasm are narrated, of equal vividness and vehemence. Their particular interest for our argument is that they form written parallels with the visual evidence to be introduced in which iconoclasts are caricatured and pilloried.

One of these narratives again concerns the iconoclast patriarch Antony (821–37), and happened under the emperor Michael II (820–29), the father of Theophilos, to whom the *Letter* is addressed. The emperor had recommended a friend and relation of his called Michael for election as the archbishop of Ephesus. Michael was reluctant to accept the nomination as he was not, apparently, a convinced iconoclast. On the morning before the planned ceremony, which was to be performed by the iconoclast patriarch Antony (821–837), the bishop-elect had a vision: he entered into the sanctuary of the church of St Sophia accompanied by an angel who promised to reveal the true relation between the patriarch and God. The angel called out from under the altar a black Ethiopian of ghastly appearance, his right hand completely withered like that of a skeleton, and his left arm trembling and bloody. The Ethiopian came up to Michael to anoint him; he sprinkled Michael's face with blood and made the form of the cross on his head in the shape of an X, and he spoke the words of God taken from Psalm II, verse 7: 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.' The angel explained to Michael that the Ethiopian was his Father and his Patriarch. Michael decided to put off his election, as it was obvious that the figure represented the devil. The text gives parallels for this sort of vision from fourth-century Alexandria in which a black Ethiopian danced on and a donkey kicked an altar, both taken as signs of the Arians, in order to emphasize the kind of heresy that Iconoclasm was supposed to be.

A second piece of anti-iconoclast polemic is the story of a vision seen by the iconophile patriarch Nicephoros (806–15) who was expelled from office with the second outbreak of Iconoclasm in 815. The vision foretold the replacement of Nicephoros by the iconoclast Theodotos

(815–821) through symbols. Nicephoros saw an olive tree covered with fruit growing in the ambo in the nave of St Sophia. The tree filled the church with its branches up to the dome. An enormous black Ethiopian with an axe appeared from the imperial box on the right side of the church and cut down the tree. A woman, shining like the sun, was seen standing inside the sanctuary, wailing and tearing her garments in misery. Another Ethiopian appeared from the sacred well of the church and he, together with the emperor (at this date Leo V, 813–20), went to the altar and stood on it. This Ethiopian was a giant and as tall as the high ciborium over the altar. The Ethiopian danced on the altar, spat towards Heaven and shouted words of blasphemy; the emperor, surrounded by a troop of soldiers in black uniforms, joined in. The emperor also made the court, generals and people join this devil in insulting the Virgin Mary. The vision ended at this point, and an interpretation of it is given: the healthy olive tree growing in the house of God represented the orthodox iconophile patriarch Nicephoros, one Ethiopian represented the iconoclast patriarch Theodotos, the weeping woman tearing the garments of orthodoxy represented the Church of Christ, and the insults represented the blasphemy of the impious iconoclasts.

To complete the text, a list of the signs which are sent by God when he wants to communicate his anger is given: these are plagues, earthquakes, shipwrecks, floods, sudden deaths, civil wars, barbarian invasions, fires in churches, the desolation of villages and cities, and people taken into captivity or slavery or put to death. The implication is that the period of Iconoclasm is marked by all of these and the way to stop such punishments is to venerate the representation of Christ.

Finally the text makes reference to the picture of the Virgin and Child painted at the beginning of the 'original copy' of the *Letter*. This image, it claims, says all there is to be said about the value of art; it embodies without words the entire contents of the letter and so demonstrates the iconophile case. At the very end, a prayer to the Virgin and all the saints is offered on behalf of Theophilos for peace and a long life.

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One question which needs to be considered before assessing the broader evidence of the *Life of St Stephen* and the *Letter* for the understanding of Iconoclasm is the list of the twelve images and the basis of its selection. The idea that miraculous icons could form a justification for the iconophile case was not novel and had been exploited at the Council of Nicaea in 787. In the fourth session (4 October), the Berytus icon stabbed by a Jew (item 9 in our list) was brought into the discussion. One question, then, is whether the *Letter* contains a carefully selected set of twelve images. This does not seem to be the case. The choice of nine from the regions of the oriental patriarchs points to inclusion on the basis of local knowledge. Even so a selection has been made, for some of the miraculous images of these regions mentioned elsewhere are omitted; one might also have expected some of the famous images