

# Byzantine Iconoclasts (726-787 CE)

also known as “First phase of Byzantine Iconoclasm”

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Byzantine iconoclasts (image breakers) were not always a homogenized group, but we now use the term to represent the interlocutors who codified the social, political, and religious conflict with iconophiles (lovers of images) into law. The first period of Iconoclasm (image breaking) in Byzantium is usually attributed to the 720s CE. Textual sources report that a prominent icon (portrait) of Christ was removed from public view in Constantinople in 726. This led to subsequent debates over whether and how it was appropriate to depict holy figures in art. The controversy oscillated until a church council in 754 forbade the use of icons, a mandate that lasted until 787. The process of iconomachy (image struggle) emerged alongside Christianity in late antiquity. As the religion spread from its origins in Jerusalem toward Rome, Constantinople, and nearby regions, practitioners of the new religion developed a visual vocabulary and artistic practices. By the sixth century, Christian icons depicting holy figures and narratives were used in churches and on domestic items. Christians also venerated holy relics, the material remains of holy people who had died and were thought to be heavenly intercessors for the living. Christians differentiated their use of icons and relics from the use of pagan idols by interpreting holy images as providing access to the divine. Periods of Byzantine iconomachy occurred because there were Christians who, for various reasons, had an aversion to figural religious images. A gathering of bishops at the Quinisext Council in 691-692 attempted to codify the respectful use of religious images. For example, they insisted on depicting Christ as a man rather than symbolically as a lamb. The council's careful attention to image use points to the emerging controversy among Orthodox Christians about whether and how it was appropriate to depict holy figures in material icons. In contrast to the visual culture of iconophiles, iconoclasts argued that earthly matter was inadequate for depicting the divine. Some took the biblical second commandment forbidding the worship of idols (Exodus 20:4-5) as a mandate against use of religious images that could be construed as idolatry. This was in keeping with existing Jewish practices in late antiquity. Many others, including Monophysite Christians in eastern provinces, preferred aniconic (non-figural) images or symbolic representations of Christ such as a cross or the celebration of the Eucharist (bread and wine commemorating Christ's sacrifice and resurrection). Some sources attribute the spread of iconomachy to increasing familiarity with aniconic Muslim practice, which criticized the Christian use of figural imagery. Byzantines knew these beliefs primarily through military encounters during the Islamic conquests by the seventh century. Iconoclasm as imperial policy is often associated with Emperor Leo III (r. 717-741), who had risen to power through a military career. He was credited with the removal of the Christ icon from the Chalke Gate, a prominent entrance to the imperial palace in 726. Another event during his reign was the dismissal of iconophile Germanos I from his position as Patriarch of Constantinople in 730. It is important to note, however, that Leo's iconoclastic tendencies were only recorded in texts written by later iconophiles. Leo's son and successor, Constantine V (r. 741-775), was a documented iconoclast. In 754 he called a church synod (assembly of bishops) that forbade the creation of holy portraits in material form. The synod also rejected the use of icon veneration in domestic, personal settings, although it made a point to honor Christ as well as the Virgin and saints through aniconic means. Notably, the effects of iconomachy were primarily in Constantinople. It is not clear whether many images were actually destroyed due to the ban or how stringently the ban was implemented outside the capital. It is possible that the controversy was primarily a philosophical and legal debate rather than a period of widespread material destruction of existing icons. The first period of Byzantine Iconoclasm ended with the Iconophile Interlude (787-802). Empress Irene (regent from 780-797) called a new church council that ruled in favor of religious portraits in 787, saying

that the honor paid to the image is transferred to its holy prototype. The Iconophile interlude was followed by a second period of Iconoclasm from 815-842. The debates were at the heart of a long struggle during which Orthodox Christians in the Byzantine Empire and beyond were forced to articulate acceptable image use within the context of theology and politics.



Date Range: 720 CE - 743 CE

Region: Byzantine Empire (395-632)

Region tags: Europe, Southeastern Europe, Middle East

Byzantine Empire (395-632)

## Status of Participants:

✓ Elite    ✓ Religious Specialists    ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

## Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Barber, Charles. *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
  - Source 2: Belting, Hans. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
  - Source 3: Brubaker, Leslie. *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012.
- Notes: Brubaker, Leslie, and John F. Haldon. *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (c. 680-850): A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Brubaker, Leslie, and John Haldon, and Robert Ousterhout. *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca. 680–850): The Sources: An Annotated Survey*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001. Maguire, Henry. *The Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and Their Images in Byzantium*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. Meyendorff, John. Chapter 3: "The Iconoclastic Crisis," in *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1983.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd\\_icon.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm)
- Source 1 Description: Brooks, Sarah. "Icons and Iconoclasm in Byzantium." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. (originally published October 2001, last revised August 2009).
- Source 2 URL: <https://smarthistory.org/byzantine-iconoclasm-2/>
- Source 2 Description: Freeman, Evan. "Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Triumph of Orthodoxy," in *Smarthistory*, February 2, 2021, accessed October 26, 2022.

Relevant online primary textual corpora (original languages and/or translations):

- Source 1 URL: <https://www.worldcat.org/title/1028177916>
- Source 1 Description: Mango, Cyril A. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453: Sources and Documents*. Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press in association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1986.
- Source 2 URL: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/sbook1c.asp>

– Source 2 Description: “Selected Sources: Byzantium,” in Paul Halsall, ed., *Internet Medieval Source Book*, (New York: Fordham Center for Medieval Studies), 1996.

## General Variables

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### Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: Iconoclasts (who were Christians and not a separate religion) were in contact with Jews and Muslims, in addition to other Christians, including others practicing Orthodoxy.

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

– Yes



Assigned by participation in a particular ritual:

– Yes

Notes: Christian baptism

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

– Yes

Notes: Although Iconoclasts were not a separate religion, the debates at church councils and among church leaders may be interpreted as a kind of proselytizing or recruitment to their interpretation of Christianity.

Does the religion have official political support

– Yes

Notes: Yes, Iconoclasts had official support during 726-787 CE.

Is there a conception of apostasy in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: All Christians had a conception of apostasy, but generally Iconoclasts and Iconophiles considered each other to be heretics, not apostates.

### Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Field doesn't know

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (% of sample region population, numerical):

– Field doesn't know

## Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also “oral scriptures” (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– Yes

↳ Are they written:

– Yes

↳ Are there formal institutions (i.e. institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders) for interpreting the scriptures:

– Yes

↳ Is there a select group of people trained in transmitting the scriptures:

– Yes

↳ Is there a codified canon of scriptures:

– Yes

## Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– Yes

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– Yes

↳ Tombs:

– Yes

↳ Devotional markers:

– Yes

↳ Mass gathering point [plazas, courtyard, square. Places permanently demarcated using visible objects or structures]:

– Yes

↳ Other type of religious monumental architecture:

– Yes [specify]: Chalke Gate

Is iconography present:

– Yes

↳ Where is iconography present [select all that apply]:

– On persons

– At home

– Some public spaces

↳ Are there distinct features in the religious group's iconography:

– Yes

↳ Aspects of doctrine (e.g. cross, trinity, Mithraic symbols):

– Yes

Notes: Iconoclasts were opposed to figural imagery and were often in favor of non-figural images such as the Cross. However, crosses and other aniconic imagery were used by all Christians and should not be interpreted as definitive presence of Iconoclasm.

Are there specific sites dedicated to sacred practice or considered sacred:

– Yes

Are pilgrimages present:

– Yes

## Beliefs

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### Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer “no” only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Yes

Belief in afterlife:

– Yes

Reincarnation in this world:

– No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Yes

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– No

Are grave goods present:

– No

Notes: Although Byzantine Christians did not bury the dead with grave goods for the afterlife, there is evidence of tombs with luxury textiles to wrap the dead, encolpia, or other symbolic objects.

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

## Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

Notes: Byzantine-era Christian doctrine is monotheistic and recognizes God in the form of the Holy Trinity. In this section, I interpret "supernatural beings" to incorporate saints, holy and heavenly intercessors who are represented in a number of holy sites and objects and in hagiographic texts. There is not always a clear indication of whether an object or text was iconoclastic. But generally speaking, divine figures were a part of Christian practice for both Iconoclasts and Iconophiles and their depiction (or lack thereof) was at the center of the Iconoclastic debates.

## Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– Yes

- ↳ There is supernatural monitoring of prosocial norm adherence in particular:  
Prosocial norms are norms that enhance cooperation among members of the group, including obviously “moral” or “ethical” norms, but also extending to norms concerning honouring contracts and oaths, providing hospitality, coming to mutual aid in emergencies, etc.  
– Yes
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about taboos:  
– Yes
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of coreligionists:  
– Yes
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of members of other religions:  
– Yes
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of members of other polities:  
– Yes
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about sex:  
– Yes
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about lying:  
– Yes
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about honouring oaths:  
– Yes
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about laziness:  
– Yes
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about sorcery:  
– Yes
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about non-lethal fighting:  
– I don't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about shirking risk:

– I don't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about disrespecting elders:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about gossiping:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about property crimes:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about proper ritual observance:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about performance of rituals:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about conversion of non-religionists:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about economic fairness:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about personal hygiene:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about other:

– Yes [specify]: Saints maintain devotion to the Holy Trinity and other figures such as Theotokos (mother of God).

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– Yes

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– Yes



↳ Is the cause/purpose of supernatural rewards known:

– Yes

↳ Done only by high god:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in the afterlife:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural rewards in the afterlife are highly emphasized by the religious group:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in this lifetime:

– Yes

### **Messianism/Eschatology**

Are messianic beliefs present:

– Yes

Is an eschatology present:

– Yes

### **Norms and Moral Realism**

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Yes

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious group:

– No

Are there centrally important virtues advocated by the religious group:

– Yes

## **Practices**

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## Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

– No

Notes: Not for the laity, although priests and monks had restrictions around sexual activity.

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):

– Yes



Monogamy (males):

– Yes



Monogamy (females):

– Yes

Does membership in this religious group require castration:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:

– Yes

Notes: Fasting is present for some occasions, including Lent. Ascetics also often participated in fasting.

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of property/valuable items:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):

– Yes

Does membership in this religious group require physical risk taking:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require accepting ethical precepts:

– Yes

Does membership in this religious group require marginalization by out-group members:

– Yes

Notes: Iconophiles and Iconodoules would have experienced marginalization while the other group's interpretation of Orthodoxy was enacted.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):

– Yes

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale "ceremonies" and "festivals."

– Yes

Does the group employ fictive kinship terminology:

– Yes

## Society and Institutions

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### Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– An empire

– An empire

Notes: I note for this section that the emperor, considered to be God's regent on earth, generally oversaw infrastructure and social systems. Both Iconoclast and Iconophile rulers had administrative roles and were acting alongside the Church. Monasteries were also purveyors of welfare resources and education.

### Welfare

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized famine relief:

– Yes

Is famine relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– I don't know

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized poverty relief:

– Yes

Is poverty relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm:

– Yes

Is institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– I don't know

### Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– Yes

Is formal education available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:

– Yes

### **Bureaucracy**

Do the group's adherents interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:

– Yes

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

– Yes

### **Public Works**

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– Yes

Is public food storage provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

– Yes

Is water management provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– I don't know

Is transportation infrastructure provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

## Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

– Yes

Are taxes levied on the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

## Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– Yes

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized police force provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– Yes

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– Yes



Do the institutionalized punishments include execution:

– Yes



Do the institutionalized punishments include exile:

– Yes



Do the institutionalized punishments include ostracism:

– Yes

Are the group's adherents subject to institutionalized punishment enforced by an

institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– Yes

Are the group's adherents subject to a formal legal code provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

## Warfare

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:

– Yes



Does the religious group in question have the power to conscript:

– Yes



Does the religious group in question maintain a full-time military corps (e.g. Swiss Guard):

– Yes



Does the religious group in question maintain a standing army:

– Yes

Do the group's adherents participate in an institutionalized military provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Are the group's adherents protected by or subject to an institutionalized military provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

## Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Notes: Byzantines used Greek and often Latin.

## Calendar

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:

– Yes

Is a formal calendar provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No