

Power through Punishment: How the Iconoclast Controversy Demonstrated the Theocratic Power of the Byzantine Emperor

Kristin Wright

The topic of crime and punishment in the medieval period often engenders ideas of torture, dungeons, witch trials, and various other macabre judiciary structures. While many of these conceptions are promulgated by modern civilization, the topic of medieval crime and punishment reveals more than just gruesome penalties; studying crime and punishment of a specific place or people allows historians the opportunity to recreate important constructs and organizations that existed within a particular culture. For the Byzantine Empire, the iconoclast controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries reveals the impact of having a unified church and state, connected through the emperorship. The roots of this controversy began in the sixth and seventh centuries when Byzantium experienced an increased use of icons. To understand the complexity of the situation it is important to explain the linguistic problem of the Greek term *eikon*. "For both Christian and Non-Christian writers, *eikon* could refer to a sacred image in any medium, visual or rhetorical."¹ This language creates a discussion concerning the actual purpose of the *eikons* for the recipient, particularly of the role of the divine.² The images at times held miraculous powers, becoming objects of worship, of prayer, and even of devotion. They could be found in private homes, shops, and at public events.³ The increased prevalence as well as the new functions for the icons led to conflicts between the iconoclasts, who rejected the worship of icons, and the iconodules, who protected the worship of icons.⁴

The iconoclast controversy, which developed around these icons, is often discussed in two waves.

The first wave occurred in the middle of the 730's and continued into the 780's, primarily during the reigns of Leo III and Constantine V. The second wave began during the 810's and ended in the 840's, mainly through to the reigns of Leo V, Michael II, and Theophilus. After proclaiming icon veneration illegal, the iconoclast emperors needed punishments for those people, primarily the iconodules, who continued creating and using images. The severity and prevalence of these punishments is a highly debated issue within secondary scholarship on the topic. The opinions regarding the degree of harshness and frequency of punishment range from those who fully support widespread icon destruction and persecutions, to scholars like Thomas Noble, who is not specifically a Byzantine historian, who argues strongly against the claims of extreme persecutions and destruction. Noble explains, "There were only a few brief periods of active hostility to images....Iconoclasm whatever caused it and whatever it meant, happened rarely and never seems to have absorbed the full energies of the Byzantine state."⁵ The reason this debate is so inconclusive pertains largely to the primary sources available. Most of the sources are written years after the events occurred, and of those sources, almost all are written from the perspective of the iconodules.⁶

With this prejudice established, it is easy to understand why many scholars, even those who believe persecutions occurred, claim the sources overstate the brutality and commonality of the icon destruction and persecutions. It is important to remember these biases, but it is also essential to remember that the Byzantines of the time were not arguing about the severity of punishment, but rather they were struggling with a conflict

¹ Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era: c.680-850* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2011), 40

² *Ibid.*, 41.

³ J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, ed. Henry and Owen Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 32.

⁴ Iconodules are sometimes referred to as iconophile in secondary literature.

⁵ Thomas F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2009, 109.

⁶ Some of the sources that will be used are Hagiographies, *Life of the Patriarch of Constantinople*, *The Chronicle of Theophanes*, *The Twenty Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church*, and treatises by Iconodules.

that “was a mixture of religion and politics, for in Constantinople the two were inseparable.”⁷ The purpose of this paper is to explain how the illegal nature of icon veneration and the subsequent punishments prove the existence and importance of the theocracy, particularly the effects of the emperor’s religious powers, within Byzantine society. In an attempt to understand how iconoclasm emphasized the Byzantine theocracy and the emperor’s religious power along with its connection to the criminalization and punishments, the controversy needs explained in regards to the actual evidence of imperial actions and persecutions under the reigns of the iconoclast emperors Leo III, Constantine V, Leo V, Michael II, and Theophilus.

Iconoclast vs. Iconodule Perspective:

At the heart of the controversy, lay three concepts, which are fundamental to understanding the arguments: image as a symbol of what it represented, image as the essence of what is represented, and the Christological doctrine connected to images of Christ.⁸ The first wave of iconoclasts argued two fundamental points: idolatry, which pertains to the first two concepts, and Christology, which pertains to the third concept. Under Leo III, the veneration of icons was seen primarily as idolatry, but under Constantine V, a Christological issue was added which claimed God had no limits so He was unable to be depicted and in depicting Him so many times, they were giving God definition and multiple natures.⁹ In the council of 754, the iconoclasts, under Constantine V’s guidance, explain both these points arguing that Satan drove people to worship the image instead of the creator, indicating the practice of idolatry. Then they continued by explaining the Christological issue asserting that, “the only admissible figure of the humanity of Christ, however, is bread and wine in the Holy Supper. This and no other form, this and no other type, has he chosen to represent his incarnation. Bread he ordered to be brought, but not a representation of the human form, so that idolatry might not arise.”¹⁰ Of these perspectives,

the idolatrous argument loses emphasis in the second wave, and the focus shifts to condemning the divine grace of God being given to images and the authority for practicing image worship.¹¹

The iconoclast council during the second wave, the Council of St. Sophia in 815, reveals the changes made to the iconoclast arguments put forth during the first wave. The advocates during this second period deemphasize the issue of Christ’s natures being anthropomorphized, and place greater emphasis on the issue of treating images themselves as holy or sanctified.¹² The positions posited at this council along with those from the first wave are more than just opinions; rather these arguments reveal why the iconoclasts were willing to fight over icons and icon veneration.

The iconodule position largely formed as a reaction to the arguments posed by the iconoclasts outlined above. The key sources for analyzing these counter-arguments are John of Damascus, the Ecumenical Council held between the first and second waves of the controversy, and Theodore the Studite. The first of these three, John of Damascus, wrote his three treatises in response to the first wave of iconoclasm. He penned impassioned arguments explaining how icon veneration should not only be allowed, but that icon veneration was theologically acceptable. One of his best arguments pertains to the idolatry issue. His evidence and ideas are so persuasive that the claim that icon veneration was idolatrous largely disappeared by the second wave. An excerpt from his work presents his argument stating,

to speak theologically, however, we, to whom it has been granted, fleeing superstitious error, to come to be purely with God, and having recognized the truth, to worship God alone and be greatly enriched with the perfection of the knowledge of God...have received the habit of discrimination from God and know what can be depicted and what cannot be delineated in an image.¹³

John is arguing that because Christians have recognized that He is the only God who has no limits, than they are not worshipping the image as

⁷ Edward James Martin, *A History of the Iconoclast Controversy* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1978), 3.

⁸ Paul J. Alexander, *The Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople: Ecclesiastical Policy and Image Worship in the Byzantine Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 23.

⁹ Martin, *A History of the Iconoclast Controversy*, 110-111.

¹⁰ H. R. Percival, trans., “Iconoclastic Council, 754,” from *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, in the Internet Medieval Sourcebook, 1996, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/iconocncl754.asp> [accessed October 29, 2012].

¹¹ Martin, *A History of the Iconoclast Controversy*, 184-185.

¹² Elizabeth A. Fisher, trans., *The Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople: Ecclesiastical Policy and Image Worship in the Byzantine Empire*, 140.

¹³ Saint John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. by Andrew Louth. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 24.

God since they already know that it is impossible to depict Him, proving that icon veneration by the Christians is not idolatry.

The Ecumenical Council of 787, which took place during the interim of the controversy between the first and second waves, furthers the above argument. The council claimed that,

the more frequently they (Jesus, Mary, Angels and Holy Persons) are seen by a pictorial representation, the more readily those who contemplate them, are excited to remembrance of and desire for the prototypes, and to bestow upon them a respectful devotion; not, however, a 'latria' (adoration), which ...is bestowed upon the divine nature alone.¹⁴

To rephrase this idea, the iconodules believed that they knew the difference between worshipping God and using icons as reminders to show religious devotion to God. For this council, the icons were not divine, but simply tools that increased a person's piety and devotion.

These two examples argue against idolatry, but in regards to the Christological issue, the writings of Theodore the Studite offer succinct summations of the iconodule counterarguments. Theodore explains that there are three parts of the trinity but only one God. This means that many representations of these three parts may exist, but there still exists only one God, so the iconoclast argument regarding Christology should be invalid.¹⁵ Theodore's arguments along with John of Damascus' writings and the Ecumenical Council's findings expound upon many different arguments against iconoclast ideas and actions, hoping to sway other ecclesiastics and government officials to prefer the iconodule argument. Despite the impassioned religious arguments of both sides, the ruler was always the ultimate decider. If the emperor favored iconoclastic ideas then he or she would most likely instate an iconoclast agenda in the empire.

Iconoclasm as Imperial Power:

The above influences and arguments depict the religious nature of the debate and the significance of the issues for leaders of both movements; however,

as noted before, it is necessary to consider the role of the emperor in this controversy. The ruler's influence is particularly important to understanding how the religious controversy led to the criminalization of religious practices as well as the punishment for crimes concerning icons and icon veneration. According to the chronicler Theophanes, icon veneration first encountered hostility from the Byzantine emperor in 725. Theophanes claims that in this year Leo III "began to frame an order condemning the august, holy icons."¹⁶ This was not a legal decree or law, but simply the emperor speaking out against icon veneration. Yet even without an initial legal decree, the religious power of the emperor is on display, through this simple renouncing of religious icon practices. The religious power on display with Leo III's disapproval did not form in regards to controversy but was already an inherent role of the emperor in the theocracy.

While no law code or edict exists today outside of the religious councils to explain the criminalization or outline the punishments, the nature of the emperor meant that such written documents were superfluous to the illegalization of icon veneration. Though the *Ecloga*, the law code codified under Leo III and Constantine V, does not mention iconoclasm, the source shows an important shift within the emperor's religious power, which influenced the emperor's theocratic rule and ultimately his ability to take action against icon veneration. In the *Ecloga*, the emperor is no longer "the law giver assisted by God," but rather God has "become the creator of justice assisted by the emperor."¹⁷ The idea that the emperor was the assistant doling out God's law and punishment slightly changes the theocratic system that existed in Byzantium. As Steven Runciman explains, "It is the Patriarch's business to see to the spiritual well-being of the Empire. However, it is the Emperor alone who can give to the recommendations of the Patriarch the force of law. He has the ultimate decision on religious as well as civil affairs. He is still the Viceroy of God."¹⁸ These notions together not only validated the emperor's ideas of possessing divine knowledge

¹⁴ The Seventh Ecumenical Council," in *The Twenty Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church*, ed. Fr. Clement Raab (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1959), 58.

¹⁵ Saint Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Catherine P. Roth (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 29.

¹⁶ Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes: an English translation of anni mundi 6095-6305*, 95.

¹⁷ J. H. A. Lokin, "The Significance of Law and Legislation in the Law books of the Ninth to the Eleventh Centuries," in *Law and Society in Byzantium Ninth-Twelfth Centuries*. ed. Angeliki E. Laiou and Dieter Simon (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995), 77.

¹⁸ Steven Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 64.

and power, but also gave the emperor large amounts of control over the church, which ultimately allowed him to criminalize icon veneration and punish those who did not abide by iconoclastic ideas. Another aspect of Byzantine law, outside of the theocratic nature of the empire, pertained to language and linguistic differences between modern ideas of law and the ideas of law that existed during the iconoclast era. While the chronicler Theophanes rarely uses the term law or legislation during the period of iconoclasm, he often uses the term illegality.¹⁹ This term illegal demonstrates that while it may not have been recorded as 'law' or 'legislation', an idea or practice may be known as illegal and as such be punishable.

The other major reason the emperors were able to establish their iconoclast agendas was that they were not alone in their iconoclastic beliefs. Despite the abundance of iconodule literature, these iconoclast emperors had ample support from both secular and religious figures. In large part, this support derives from the emperor's religious power and duties. During this time, "Episcopal appointments were under effective imperial control, but the rule that bishops must be celibate while priests could be married meant that most bishops were drawn from the ranks of the monks."²⁰ This means that while many bishops held the iconodule views of numerous monks, others such as those with closer relationships to the emperor would largely have supported the emperor's ideas. At the iconodule Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787, the council allowed bishops to recount their iconoclast beliefs if they wished to be part of the council. During the first three sessions, at least 10 iconoclast bishops renounced their iconoclast ideas and were accepted by the iconodule council.²¹ One can assume that these were not the only iconoclast bishops from the time, which demonstrates that there existed a large number of iconoclast bishops to support the emperor. With support from religious leaders and political pundits along with the emperor's own religious legal authority, the Byzantine emperors possessed the necessary power to make icons and icon veneration illegal.

¹⁹ Angeliki E. Laiou, "Law, Justice, and Byzantine Historians: Ninth to Twelfth Centuries," in *Law and Society in Byzantium Ninth-Twelfth Centuries*. ed. Angeliki E. Laiou and Dieter Simon (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995), 159-160.

²⁰ Patrick Henry, "What Was the Iconoclastic Controversy about?" *Church History* 45, no. 1 (Mar., 1976): 29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3164562> [accessed October 11, 2012].

²¹ "The Seventh Ecumenical Council," 56.

First Wave (730-787)

Keeping in mind the religious, legal, and political circumstances shaping this controversy it is now crucial to look more directly at individual emperors' actions through, the sometimes extreme and exaggerated descriptions of icon destruction and iconodule persecutions. These instances, while the rarity, are some of the only insights into the punishments during the controversy; however, keeping in mind their hyperbolic nature, scholars can use the instances to make inferences about the emperors' power over religion through their secular power as a legal authority. It is also important to note that most of these punishments pertain to the secular or regular clergy and not the ordinary people. There is little evidence outside the destruction of public icons that regular citizens faced these extreme punishments. In the following sections, particular situations under each emperor will be discussed to reveal how their punishments exposed the theocratic power of the Byzantine emperor.

Leo III (717-741)

Under Leo III, the first iconoclast emperor, there was "a steady destruction of icons and holy paintings in Constantinople and to a lesser extent in the provinces. Anyone who tried to hinder the work of destruction was sternly punished."²² Along with these minor incidents, which do not offer much detail, the major instances of punishment under Leo III concern the expulsion of Germanos as patriarch, the destruction of an important icon of Christ above a city gate, and the death of St. Theodosia. The first of these instances, pertaining to Germanos, appears both in the *Short History* by Nikephoros and in *The Chronicle of Theophanes*. Theophanes claims that in 730 the Patriarch Germanos was expelled from his position because he was unwilling to submit to the emperor's iconoclast thinking even though he was directly under the emperor's control.²³ Nikephoros' account supports Theophanes' and even maintains that others who did not accept the imperial doctrine faced more than exile, but also torture and punishment.²⁴ The situation concerning Germanos shows how the emperor exercised substantial power over the most prominent religious figure in Byzantium, and when that religious figure disagreed the emperor had the authority to dismiss and exile

²² Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy*, 70.

²³ Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes: an English translation of anni mundi 6095-6305*, 100.

²⁴ Nikephoros, *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople Short History*, trans. and ed. Cyril Mango (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), 63.

the patriarch of Byzantium, replacing him with a man who would support the emperor's policies.

The second significant event pertains to Saint Theodosia. The hagiography of St. Theodosia explains how Leo III ordered the destruction of an important icon, which depicted Christ in human form, above one of the gates of Constantinople. Supposedly, Theodosia and her companions attempted to thwart this destruction, but they failed. Leo III's men slit Theodosia's throat and decapitated all of her companions.²⁵ This example shows not only the destruction of a holy icon ordered by the emperor, but also a religious woman who believed so strongly in iconodule ideas that she was willing to die to protect an icon. Theodosia was named a martyr for her actions, which shows how influential and crucial the controversy was to the religious life and faith of many Byzantines. The authors particularly gruesome and heinous portrayal of this event is a literary tool used to prove Theodosia's devoutness. Despite the embellishments, the occurrence also reveals how the emperor had the religious and secular power and enough support to carry out the destruction of icons within the political, cultural, and religious center of his empire. The idea that the citizens of Constantinople, specifically the iconodules, experienced the punishments and destructions most severely emphasized that this city was the center of the emperor's power. If Leo III could not enforce his policy here, it would be almost impossible to enforce it in the provinces.²⁶ These examples reveal how Leo III set up a foundation for future emperors, particularly his son, Constantine V, to install similar religious policies. In addition, Leo established particular precedents for how to handle those who did not conform to the Emperor's religious program through his icon destructions and persecutions.

Constantine V (741-775)

Many writings, both primary and secondary, portray Constantine V, Leo III's successor and son, as the most violent persecutor of all the iconoclast emperors; however, they also credit him with the institutionalization and organization of the iconoclastic movement. Seeing the difficulties of his father concerning the criminalization of icons,

Constantine decided that having proof of the church's support would help convince people of iconoclasm's legitimacy.²⁷ In 754, Constantine called a council of bishops who stated their arguments against icon veneration. They declared,

Whoever in the future dares to make such a thing, or to venerate it, or set it up in a church, or in a private house, or possesses it in secret, shall, if bishop, presbyter, or deacon, be deposed; if monk or layman, be anathematized, and become liable to be tried by the secular laws as an adversary of God and an enemy of the doctrines handed down by the Fathers.²⁸

This council, at the request of the emperor, created an official documented decree against iconodules and their practices. The importance of the council is that it was called by Constantine, the arguments were developed with Constantine's consent, and the legitimacy of the council came from Constantine's presence and approval. The council also set the stage for the persecutions that occurred when Constantine became frustrated with the continued resistance to iconoclast ideas. Examples of these persecutions can be found in the hagiography of St. Stephen, *The Chronicle of Theophanes*, and Nikephoros' *Short History*.

The death of St. Stephen, which is not only recorded in his hagiography but also in Nikephoros' account is possibly the most renowned persecution under Constantine V.²⁹ In the hagiography of St. Stephen, Stephen is one of hundreds persecuted for his practices, but while others are deprived of noses, ears, eyes, hands, and beards, Stephen suffers a rather grisly death. They dragged him along "a public road, while [people] threw stones at him and struck him with wooden clubs."³⁰ The passage continues on describing his terrible death, but what is particularly interesting is the description of people of the public participating in the death. While not all may have supported iconoclasm, and many may have simply been following the crowd, their participation in this persecution showed support for their emperor's religious and state power. The

²⁵ Nicholas Constas, trans., "Life of St. Theodosia of Constantinople," in *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints' Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1998), 6-7.

²⁶ Alexander, *The Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople: Ecclesiastical Policy and Image Worship in the Byzantine Empire*, 143.

²⁷ Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy*, 74.

²⁸ H. R. Percival, trans., "Iconoclastic Council, 754."

²⁹ Nikephoros, *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople Short History*, 155.

³⁰ Alice-Mary Talbot, trans., "Life of Saint Stephen the Younger," in *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints' Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1998), 12.

people accepted that the emperor had condemned Stephen, and that was all the people needed to understand before taking part in the attack.

Along with St. Stephen's death, *The Chronicle of Theophanes* and Nikephoros' *Short History* record other punishments ordered by Constantine V. Theophanes said that in 754, Constantine anathematized, "the holy Germanos, George of Cyprus, and John Chrysorroas of Damascus, who were holy men and venerable teachers."³¹ Here the emperor reveals his authority to reduce the power and significance of important religious scholars. As these intellectuals lost the emperor's favor, they would not hold the same prominence in society. This also meant that Constantine could replace them with teachers who would preach his beliefs and preach support of the emperor's power and policies. Later in the entry for September 1, 765 through August 31, 766, Theophanes offers numerous different punishments and terrors carried out by Constantine over these months. He claims, "From everyone under his rule he demanded a general pledge that they would not venerate an icon."³² After this, he made the patriarch swear on the altar and cross that no one venerated icons, and forced him to take a wife. On August 21, he forced numerous monks to take wives and subjected them to ridicule in front of all the people in the hippodrome. The text continues on to explain how the leaders were also beaten, blinded, and exiled.³³ These punishments were not just for supporting icons, but also for plotting against the emperor because of their discontent with his policies. The significance of these punishments is that they are carried out in front of the populace, at least those present at the hippodrome. The emperor was not carrying out his punishments in secret, but rather in front of the people of Constantinople. In addition, the people there take part in the punishment by spitting on the men and cursing them. The people did not revolt or stand up to the emperor, but accepted his judgment and participated in the punishment of these men. The events also showed what happened to a person or group of people, who disagreed with or plotted against the emperor. His punishment sends a strong message that resistance would not be tolerated, and that his religious and secular power would prevail over such attempts.

³¹ Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes: an English translation of anni mundi 6095-6305*. ed. and trans. Harry Turtledove (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 117.

³² *Ibid.*, 125.

³³ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

Nikephoros' *Short History* also relates some of the events and claims stated by Theophanes, but in broader terms. In regards to monks, Nikephoros claims that Constantine ordered many who were living according to God to be beaten with icons, have their eyes gouged out, or body parts cut off.³⁴ This mirrors some of the accusations made by Theophanes, and it reiterates the large amount of control Constantine had as the Byzantine emperor. While the source may be exaggerated, it still shows how the emperor's iconoclast policy was prevalent enough and effective enough to carry out these punishments. He was not performing the beatings and torture himself, but he must have had enough loyal supporters to carry out these punishments for him. Nikephoros also writes that

They brought under accusation many men invested with authority as well as members of the army, charging them with worshipping holy icons, and killed them as if they had been found guilty of sacrilege; some they subjected to different kinds of death, on others they inflicted unusual punishments, while a great multitude were exiled.³⁵

This quote shows that it was not just religious leaders and monks who were punished. The punishment of secular leaders and military personnel reemphasizes the interconnected nature of Constantine's religious and secular power. His religious ruling that icons and icon veneration were illegal did not just affect monks or priests, but also the people in his government and military. This was truly a theocratic rule, in which religious practice had a large impact on secular affairs.

Constantine's iconoclast council along with his strict persecutions showed that as emperor he had enough support within the church to initiate an official council supporting iconoclasm and to punish those who resisted. In addition, the course of events during his rule exemplifies that there was no group powerful enough in Byzantine society to overthrow imperial power when a strong ruler was in place, even when the emperor's imperial decrees were controversial.³⁶ This argument gains validation with the conclusion of the first wave of iconoclasm under the empress Irene; however,

³⁴ Nikephoros, *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople Short History*, trans. and ed. Cyril Mango (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), 153.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

³⁶ Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era: c.680-850*, 197-198.

this situation will only be discussed briefly as this paper focuses on the iconoclast rulers and not the iconodule rulers. Empress Irene, as regent for her son, re-legalized icon veneration. While this only lasted a short period, her ability to overturn the religious doctrine of the previous ruler showed that the emperor truly held significant religious control, and that these iconoclast rulers were not unique in their religious actions as emperors. These Byzantine rulers could put forth controversial agendas that affected religious and secular traditions throughout the empire.

Second Wave (814-842)

The second wave of iconoclasm contains less detailed primary evidence than the first, largely because of a lack of chronicles and sources pertaining to the reigns of these later iconoclast emperors.³⁷ From the sources that are available, the iconoclast emperors of this time still held the important theocratic position evident in the rules of Leo III and Constantine V. Paul J. Alexander explains that, “during the second period of Iconoclasm and after the restoration of orthodoxy the iconophiles tended to emphasize more and more that the Iconoclasts justified their persecution in terms of imperial power.”³⁸ In fact, it is claimed that at this time the emperor’s power over both church and state was so prominent that if an emperor supported the heresy of Manichaeism, the heretics would win because they had the support of the emperor.³⁹ The idea that this heretical group could gain legitimacy through the emperor’s support highlights the tremendous political control the emperor held over religious matters in Byzantium. This also shows that this power had not declined after the first wave but had continued to persist through the interim of iconodule leaders and throughout the second wave.

Leo the Armenian (813-820)

When Leo V, the Armenian, took control in Byzantium, it was after the assassination of the previous iconodule emperor. Leo V was convinced to abolish icons when he observed that “...all the emperors who had not venerated icons had died natural deaths while still reigning, and had enjoyed honorable burial among the imperial tombs in the

Church of the Holy Apostles.”⁴⁰ Warren Treadgold explains that after recognizing this trend and noting that the previous iconodule ruler had been assassinated, Leo V felt that the only possible reason for the previous ruler’s death was that God disapproved of iconodule policies. To secure his rule as well as his son’s rule for generations to come, the only logical action would be to reinstate an iconoclast agenda.⁴¹ The decision itself has more of a political nature, but it reveals how the emperor could use religious issues to secure his political role and power if necessary.

The history *Genesios* provides other evidence for Leo’s iconoclast policies explaining how he ordered the destruction of icons and exiled Nikephoros.⁴² Despite this negative portrayal, *Genesios* also credits Leo with being a strong administrator of public affairs, which supports the interconnected state and church roles held by the ruler.⁴³ If the ruler could not successfully rule over the secular and religious at the same time, he would not be able to control the empire. The exile of Nikephoros is also supported by the hagiography of St. Nikephoros, which claims that Leo early on refused to sign a document confirming his orthodox thinking, or rather iconodule thinking.⁴⁴ Later he forced many important officials to affirm their belief in iconoclast thinking and he anathematized Nikephoros, exiling him from the city.⁴⁵ This exiling resembles the ousting of Germanos under Leo III. With this action, Leo V established his religious power as emperor and showed the religious community he would not tolerate iconodule thinking from his administrators and officials.

The other major primary sources for this second wave are the letters of Theodore the Studite. In one of Theodore’s works, he claims Leo was responsible for

...the destruction of altars and of sacred vessels, the burning of vestments and manuscripts, the investigation of individuals and households, the

⁴⁰ Warren T. Treadgold, *The Byzantine revival, 780-842* (Stanford University Press, 1988), 208, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;idno=heb02889> [accessed October 29, 2012].

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴² Anthony Kaldellis, trans., *Genesios on the Reigns of the Emperors* (Sydney, Australia: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1998), 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth A. Fisher, trans., “Life of the Patriarch of Constantinople,” in *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints’ Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1998), 73.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁷ Martin, *A History of the Iconoclast Controversy*, 206.

³⁸ Paul J. Alexander, “Religious Persecution and Resistance in the Byzantine Empire of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries: Methods and Justifications,” *Speculum* 52, no. 2 (Apr., 1977): 258, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2850512> [accessed October 11, 2012].

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

recriminations among members of the clergy and the rewards offered for betrayal, beatings, jailings, exile and execution of resisters - with the remark: 'There is one law only - the will of Caesar.'⁴⁶

While Theodore meant his quote to be a negative portrayal of Leo's actions, the severity and frequency of these punishments and actions do not garner much support from other primary sources. The ending statement of this quote: 'There is one law only - the will of Caesar,' however, supports the idea that the law, even religious law, gained all authority from the emperor who had sole control over what legislation was important in the empire and the manner in which the government administered such legislation.

Michael II (820-829) & Theophilus (829-842)

The last two iconoclast emperors have even less primary evidence than Leo V. For this reason, the two will be discussed together. Both Michael II and his son Theophilus had iconoclastic tendencies but were rather tolerant of iconodules and their ideas.⁴⁷ *Genesios* even explains that despite Michael's uncultured nature, "concerning the divine images, he allowed everyone to act and believe as they saw fit."⁴⁸ The only major punishment under Michael pertained to the future Patriarch Methodius who was imprisoned for trying to convince Michael not to continue iconoclasm.⁴⁹ This particular instance is important for two reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates once again the Emperor's power to exile and punish those who disagreed with his practices. Secondly, this showed how the iconodules recognized that if they wanted iconodule thinking to regain prominence they would need the support of the emperor, since he was the ultimate law of the land.⁵⁰

Following Michael II, Emperor Theophilus' only major action against icon veneration seems to be the banning of religious paintings;⁵¹ however, he is also credited with freeing Methodius from his prison cell.⁵² These last two rulers show a much

less extreme approach to iconoclasm, but this seems fitting since both were less concerned with religious affairs than their predecessors. Even with this decreased interest, the instances that do pertain to iconoclasm, under Michael and Theophilus, reveal that the emperor's power over religion stayed strong, even when religion was not the main concern of the ruler. While they may not be as harsh with punishments, they still had the power to imprison iconodules and ban religious paintings. They also made the conscious decision to be more tolerant, which depicts religious power in a different form. Instead of emphasizing their control through harsh punishments, they garnered support through more tolerance and the occasional legal action against iconodule supporters.

Conclusions

The trajectory of the iconoclast era ebbs and flows in severity, prevalence, and importance, but the theocratic power of the emperor is continuously on display regardless of the larger shifts of the controversy. Alexander explains that the change from less violent propagation of ideas to the more violent persecutions was a natural shift for the emperors and that these emperors knew when and how to make the transition.⁵³ He argues that "most emperors, especially those belonging to new dynasties (Leo III, Michael II) or those whose throne was initially shaky (Constantine V, Irene), delayed measures of religious persecution until they had consolidated their power over state and church."⁵⁴ As this quote reiterates, the emperors' religious power was intricately tied to his power over the state. If his power over the state was tenuous, religious reform movements like iconoclasm would not have been accepted or plausible. In addition, while the controversy revealed severe limitations to the emperor's theocratic rule, the conflict also showed that these emperors could hold immense amounts of control over the church personnel, institutions, and teachings, even to the point of implementing stringent repression of religious dissenters.⁵⁵ The criminalization and subsequent punishments during the iconoclast controversy highlight the interconnectedness of government, law, and religion within the theocratic empire embodied by the Byzantine emperor.

⁴⁶ Alexander, "Religious Persecution and Resistance in the Byzantine Empire of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries: Methods and Justifications," 259.

⁴⁷ Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy*, 89.

⁴⁸ Kaldellis, trans., *Genesios on the Reigns of the Emperors*, 42.

⁴⁹ Warren T. Treadgold, *The Byzantine revival, 780-842*, 234.

⁵⁰ This event is also referenced in, Kaldellis, trans., *Genesios on the Reigns of the Emperors*, 43.

⁵¹ Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy*, 89.

⁵² Kaldellis, trans., *Genesios on the Reigns of the Emperors*, 70.

⁵³ Alexander, "Religious Persecution and Resistance in the Byzantine Empire of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries: Methods and Justifications," 255

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 263-264.

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