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Monasteries and the Preservation of Visual Culture in the Iconoclast Period

Though scholars have extensively studied the Iconoclast period, 726 to 787 and 815 to 843 A.D., there is little consensus on the role of monasticism in the debates over the veneration of icons during these periods. This is perhaps because the majority of the literature from the eighth and ninth centuries on the matter was written by monks who likely embellished stories of atrocities against images and against iconophiles.¹ As John Haldon recognizes in his essay *Iconoclasm in Byzantium: Myths and Realities*, the material that scholars must work with is a “particularly problematic body of primary sources.”² While it is widely understood that several monasteries, including Chora, Stoudios, and Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai, resisted iconoclasm, the degree to which monks were persecuted and icons were violently destroyed continues to be contested. Further, the anti-monastic edge of iconoclasm complicates the matter, suggesting that the monasteries must have served, at least to a degree, as an antagonist to the iconoclasts. Three predominate theories have emerged on the motivation of the iconoclasts to turn on monasteries as a whole. First is the belief that the iconoclastic movement was designed as antagonistic to monasteries in order to confiscate their growing land holdings.³ This view is seemingly heavily

¹ “Iconoclasm in Byzantium: Myths and Realities,” John Haldon, accessed May 29, 2015, <https://www.lsa.umich.edu/UMICH/classics/Home/News/Platsis%20Endowment/2007%20-%20Haldon,%20Iconoclasm%20in%20the%20Byzantine%20World%20myths%20and%20realities.pdf>

² “Iconoclasm in Byzantium: Myths and Realities.”

³ Stephen Gero, “Byzantine Iconoclasm and Monachomachy,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 28 (1977): 241, accessed May 29, 2015, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0022046900041439>

reliant on eighth and ninth century propagandist writings by monks and has become outdated. Others believe that the large number of iconophile monks was an obstacle for the iconoclast Empire's authority and thus monasticism became the enemy.⁴ Indeed it does seem that some took monastic vows as a means for influencing imperial policy⁵ through an entity that could serve as an interest group. A third approach suggests that both monasticism and icon veneration were "illegitimate, unlicensed forms of spirituality"⁶ which was a threat to the Byzantine Empire as it battled Islamic forces.⁷ Regardless of which theory is most accurate, the Iconoclast period continues to puzzle scholars as consensus on the depiction of Christ in human form reversed in fewer than 40 years. The Church's Council of Trullo in 692 produced a canon, which ordered that the portrayal of Jesus Christ should take human form rather than the early Christian symbol of the Lamb of God.⁸ This canon affirmed the preexisting style of icons, which monks were already producing and were supported by imperial powers through Justinian II's novel coinage, which included images of either a bearded Christ or a young Christ.⁹ The bearded image of Christ on the coin appears to take inspiration from pre-existing icons produced by monks.¹⁰ However, by 730, the Byzantine emperor and imperial powers officially and vehemently opposed the production of icons. In 787, the Empire again changed its position on the issue but in 815 reverted again to iconoclastic policies. It appears that only four preiconoclastic icons survive today,¹¹ all located at the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. While they are few in number, they are crucial for understanding the trajectory of visual culture in Byzantium

⁴ Gero, "Byzantine Iconoclasm and Monachomachy," 241.

⁵ "Iconoclasm in Byzantium: Myths and Realities."

⁶ Gero, "Byzantine Iconoclasm and Monachomachy."

⁷ Gero, "Byzantine Iconoclasm and Monachomachy."

⁸ Judith Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 95.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Kurt Weitzman, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons, Volume One: From the Sixth Century to the Tenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 4.

and in monastic tradition, suggesting that the monastery is paramount to our contemporary understanding of the development of the tradition of icon painting.

In his aforementioned essay, Haldon suggests that contrary to the widely believed notion that the Church and all theological entities opposed iconoclasm the majority of bishops obliged the Empire with apathy, or even active support by contributing to the debate.¹² He suggests that it was, instead, a relatively small group of monks, predominately from urban monastic communities, who passionately opposed the iconoclasts.¹³ Iconophile monks voiced their opposition at a council in 787 when many bishops from eastern provinces acknowledged that they were iconoclasts predominately because it was the only position with which they were familiar.¹⁴ He continues to note that texts written by the patriarch Nikephoros suggest that the public was unfamiliar with the iconophiles' position and "had not taken into account the fact that the iconoclasts were evil and ignorant people."¹⁵ While the majority of the public was tending towards apathy, some monastic communities continued to produce icons and several monasteries became "repositories of icon collection."¹⁶ A group of exiled monks from Studios Monastery went so far as to create a virtual community from their various locations to uphold their iconophile traditions.¹⁷ A similar community developed amongst the exiled monks of the Chora Monastery. Still most abbots of monastic communities found it safer to adopt imperial policies as opposing "official theology publicly in Byzantium often led to death,"¹⁸ Judith Herrin explains in her essay *Changing Functions of Monasteries for Women during Byzantine Iconoclasm*.

¹² Iconoclasm in Byzantium: Myths and Realities."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ William M. Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 633.

¹⁷ Judith Herrin, "Changing Functions of Monasteries for Women During Byzantine Iconoclasm," in *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience: 800-1200*, ed. Lynda Garland et al. (London: Ashgate Pub Co, 2006), 3.

¹⁸ Ibid, 1.

Indeed the literature of the eighth and ninth century, though potentially exaggerated and propagandist, suggests horrible punishments. Those who continued to icon-worship in the home, often women, would be sent to prison if caught.¹⁹ At best, iconophile monks were exiled. Groups of iconophile monks were often replaced with groups of iconoclastic monks.²⁰ Thus, exiling all the monks residing in a monastery and replacing them with more agreeable monks could resolve an antagonistic monastic community. Other tales tell of mutilation and execution. It was recorded that at one point, “monks were herded into the Hippodrome in Constantinople, surrounded by prostitutes from the city, and faced with the choice of either marriage to one or death.”²¹ Another incident followed the Council of Hieria in 760, where a monk was whipped and tortured to death at the hippodrome.²² If these stories are indeed true, and not the product of the rewriting of the ninth century by monks, then it is no wonder that the majority of the public and the majority of those in ecclesiastical positions preferred apathy and adherence.

Thus the actions taken by the monks at Saint Catherine were perilous. Saint Catherine holds several icons that reach back to the preiconoclastic period. While the production of icons was seen sporadically in the fourth century, with greater regularity in the fifth, it is only in the sixth that the tradition was firmly established and it is believed that four of the icons in the monastery’s collection are from this century.²³ It seems also that icons continued to be transported to the monastery in the seventh century under the Arab conquest and that these icons were produced in regions controlled by the Islamic Empire.²⁴ Given their rarity, these icons are

¹⁹ Ibid, 1.

²⁰ Ibid, 3.

²¹ Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, 633.

²² Herrin, “Changing Functions of Monasteries for Women During Byzantine Iconoclasm,” 8.

²³ Weitzman, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons, Volume One: From the Sixth Century to the Tenth Century*, 5.

²⁴ Ibid.

particularly valuable to understanding Byzantine and early Christian visual culture, largely produced by monks, from the preiconoclastic and iconoclastic periods.

The abovementioned coins minted under Justinian II take after an encaustic on panel icon from the Monastery of Saint Catherine. In this depiction, Christ holds his right hand with his middle and index fingers against his thumb and his other two fingers raised, a gesture representative of teaching. In his left arm, he carries an elegant book. As the earliest remaining of this specific depiction, commonly known as Christ Pantocrator, we can see the influences the preiconoclastic works had and continue to have on Christian visual culture. Today, numismatists can understand the influence Christian icons had on Byzantine currency because iconophile monks at the Monastery of Saint Catherine strove to save preiconoclastic icons. Similarly, the encaustic panel of Christ is stylistically similar to frescos found in Rome from the same period, telling of a broader artistic style present in the Byzantine Empire. Herrin speaks in *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* of the icons at Saint Catherine from the period of iconoclasm, that display Christ rising from the dead, a revelation denied by Muslims in the region.²⁵ These icons suggest the use of icon painting as a means for political propaganda in the Byzantine Empire, a purpose which would have been lost to us today had iconophile monks not stepped away from the apathy of the Church. Further, an analysis of the icons from the iconoclast period at Saint Catherine in comparison to later icons suggest that the same workshops continued to produce through the iconoclast period and afterwards. Comparing these icons from the same studio, we can see the beginnings of the development of a new style in the second half of the ninth century, following the second iconoclast period.²⁶

²⁵ Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*, 115.

²⁶ Weitzman, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons, Volume One: From the Sixth Century to the Tenth Century*, 5.

While the role of monks and monastic communities in the iconoclast debates is still contended, those that did participate in protecting icons and traditions of icon veneration efforts were not futile. Without the icons from the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai, a gaping hole would exist in our contemporary understanding of the continued development of Christian art, a tradition that would continue to manifest itself across the trajectory of Western visual culture to this day.

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