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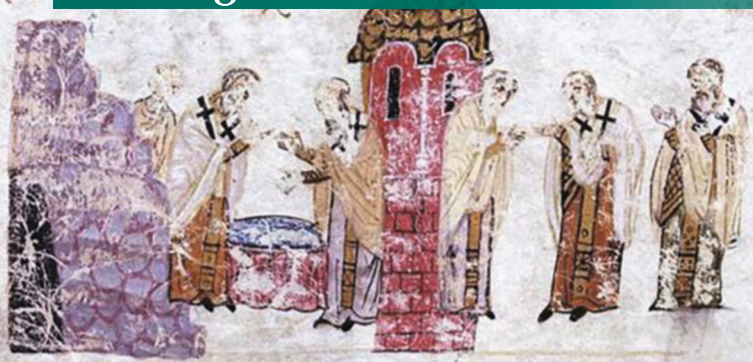
Church Policy of Byzantium after the Triumph of Orthodoxy (843–886)

Predrag Komatina



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ISSN 2730-9363 ISSN 2730-9371 (electronic)
New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture
ISBN 978-3-031-91253-5 ISBN 978-3-031-91254-2 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-91254-2

Cover credit line: © Scylitzes, John, Flourished 1081 Author. History of Byzantium / Retrieved from the Library of Congress

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Preface

The monograph *Church Policy of Byzantium after the Triumph of Orthodoxy (843–886)* represents an amended and reworked version of the Serbian edition *Crkvena politika Vizantije od kraja ikonoborstva do smrti cara Vasilija I*, Beograd 2014, which, again, was based on the doctoral dissertation "Crkvena politika Vizantije (843–886)", defended at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy in 2012, before an international commission, which consisted of Prof. Dr Vlada Stanković, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy (mentor), Prof. Dr Radivoj Radić, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Prof. Dr Angel Nikolov, University "St Clement of Ohrid", Sofia, Prof. Dr Tatjana Subotin-Golubović, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy.

The phrase "Church policy of Byzantium", indicated in the title, should be understood to refer to the "policy of the Byzantine Empire in ecclesiastical affairs", that is the policy that the emperor and the imperial authorities conducted towards the Church and in the field of ecclesiastical affairs more generally. In the period concerned, this covers the various issues of Iconoclasm and Orthodoxy, the appointment of the patriarchs, relations with the Church of Rome, theological disputes with the Muslims, Non-Chalcedonian Christians and Christian sects, missionary activity outside the borders of the Empire aimed at the conversion of foreign peoples to Christianity, as well as towards the religious minorities inside it, but also the political and intellectual potential that stood behind these policies. It is important to emphasize that this does not mean church policy was always the same or even consistent. It depended largely on the personality of the emperor or other holders of supreme state authority, on the

personality of the patriarch, and on general circumstances, and shifted in accordance with these factors. Furthermore, it is not the intention to suggest that the imperial and patriarchal authority should be viewed as institutions *per se*, existing independently of the personalities of their bearers.

It is apparent that the relationship between the two was more complex and in many respects depended on the person of the emperor or the patriarch, on their personal relationship and personal attitudes towards one another. The same can be said of relations between the Eastern and Western Churches, which again were complex and changed, sometimes dramatically, in accordance with political and other circumstances making it impossible always to speak of a constant and consistent policy of the emperor towards the pope, or of the pope towards the patriarch or vice-versa, even when dealing with the same protagonists. The same was also true for the relationship within the camp of the victorious iconophile party in the post-iconoclastic period, which cannot be viewed as strictly divided into "extremist" and "moderate" factions, as is usually assumed in the scholarship. Thus, the "church policy of Byzantium" in the post-iconoclastic period is not presented as a kind of a historical phenomenon, but rather as a history of the events that marked the ecclesiastical affairs of Byzantium in the given period.

The restoration of the cult of icons in 843 is taken as a starting point, as it represented a crossroads in both the ecclesiastical and political history of Byzantium, when the Christian Empire of the Romans returned to its Orthodox roots. The period that followed was marked by turbulence in the Byzantine church, further schisms, when the old gave birth to new, and the new threw the old into the shadows, in which the state tried to stabilize the church, but disturbances in the church often destabilized the state. Moreover, the period also witnessed the restoration of secular learning, the representatives of which strove more than ever to take over the management of ecclesiastical affairs and the most important positions from the hands of strict, rich in spirit, but poorly educated monasticism. Monasticism, persecuted under the iconoclasts, re-emerges as the greatest moral authority in Byzantine society. In such internal circumstances, an unprecedented external expansion of the Byzantine church and religion took place, including the inclusion of vast numbers of barbarian Russians, Khazars, Bulgarians and Slavs in Central Europe into the Byzantine cultural and spiritual circle. Byzantine Orthodoxy then successfully coped with the theological challenges of Islam, while threatening the very survival of the Jews in its territory. Finally, in that era, the Church of

Constantinople tried for the first time to act completely independently of the Apostolic See of Old Rome and to see itself as the centre of the entire Christian universe. The main protagonists in all those events were the bearers of the highest state authority—Empress Theodora (842–856), Logothete Theoctistus (until 855), Caesar Bardas (until 866), Emperor Michael III (842–867) and Emperor Basil I (867–886); then the holders of the highest ecclesiastical authority—patriarchs of Constantinople Methodius (843–847), Ignatius (847–858, 867–877) and Photius (858–867, 877–886). Nor should we forget intellectuals, such as Constantine the Philosopher († 869) and monks, such as his brother Methodius († 885). This epoch, so rich in events and so important for Byzantine and European history, ended with the disappearance of the last of its protagonists—the death of Methodius and Emperor Basil I and Photius' final withdrawal from the stage. Those events, in 885 and 886, marked a new turning point in the history of Byzantine church politics, and directed its course in a different direction.

The period of Byzantine history between 843 and 886 is fairly well covered by historical sources. As far as narrative sources are concerned, the period this book deals with did not, however, produce any contemporary historians or chroniclers to describe it. The only one writing in the genre at the time was George the Monk, and his *Chronicle* ends precisely in the year 843, with the events that are taken as the starting point here. Other chroniclers whose works cover the period between 843 and 886 wrote almost a century later, in the middle of the tenth century. These are the Continuator of Theophanes, Genesius, Symeon the Logothete, authors from the so-called groups of Symeon the Logothete and the continuers of George the Monk. However, due to the distance in time from the events they were describing, the statements of these chroniclers are not always the most accurate or precise, sometimes obscured by legend, and often burdened with ideology. Since they were created during the reign of emperors from the Macedonian dynasty, descended from Basil I, on the whole, they portray the reign of Michael III in a negative light.

The lack of reliable, contemporary histories and chronicles is largely made up for by the contemporary documentary sources. The Acts of the councils of 869–870 and 879–880 are the most reliable sources for the schism in the Church of Constantinople between the faction of Patriarch Photius and the faction of Patriarch Ignatius, and now a new edition of the Latin translation of the acts of the council of 869–870 by Anastasius the Librarian, with its prehistory, is available to researchers. However, it is the

extremely rich opus of Patriarch Photius himself that constitutes the outstanding source for the era. The main part, in terms of the knowledge available to historians, consists of almost three hundred preserved epistles, addressed to the most prominent representatives of leading state and church circles, both within the Empire and throughout the entire area that came within the framework of his ecclesiastical policy at the time, of which certainly the most significant is his correspondence with Pope Nicholas I, Bulgarian prince Boris and the Armenian prince and catholicos. In addition to the epistles, there are sermons (*Homiliae*), letters to a friend, Metropolitan Amphilochius of Cyzicus (*Amphilochia*), the impressive *Bibliotheca*, but also other, shorter writings. In addition to Patriarch Photius, the writings of Patriarch Methodius have also been preserved, a number of which refer to current circumstances in the church related to the *Studite Schism*, which arose during his tenure, and represent a first-class source for those events.

A special place in the reconstruction of events for the period 843–886 and the roles of different personalities in them belong to Byzantine *hagiography*. This genre, one could say, flourished in the period after 843. Patriarch Methodius and Patriarch Ignatius both received saintly *lives*, and they provide a wealth of information on politics at the very top of the Church of Constantinople. The resistance to iconoclasts during the second iconoclast period gave birth to numerous ascetics and heroes of Orthodoxy. The most important of them, such as Joannicius, Michael the Syncell, Symeon the Stylite, Hilarion of Dalmatos, as well as various members of the Studite monastic community, also got *lives*. These *lives* are also the main source of information on events related to the restoration of the veneration of icons and the years that immediately followed, far better than the later, distorted accounts of the chroniclers of the tenth century, and among them, a compilation known as the *Acts of David*, *Symeon and George*, is especially significant. A detailed analysis of the mentioned hagiographic works, but also of all other written sources composed during the ninth century in the historical circumstances that this book deals with, along with an assessment of their historical value, in addition to studies of other researchers, was recently given by Óscar Prieto Domínguez, *Literary Circles in Byzantine Iconoclasm: Patrons, Politics and Saints*, Cambridge 2020, making their use as historical sources significantly easier.

In addition to Greek, a large amount of information about this period is provided by sources in Latin. First of all, there are the numerous letters of the Roman popes Leo IV, Benedict III, Nicholas I, Hadrian II, John

VIII and Stephen V, addressed to Byzantine emperors and patriarchs, secular and spiritual dignitaries, but also to the rulers of Bulgaria and neighbouring Slavic countries, which, with the aforementioned acts of the church councils of 869–870 and 879–880, contribute the most to elucidating the circumstances related to the so-called *Schism of Photius*, not only in the field of mutual relations between the Churches of Rome and Constantinople during the schism, but also in the field of relations within the Byzantine church itself. Useful, albeit fragmentary data can also be found in the Frankish annals of the time, which have the advantage of being contemporary.

Left to last, but by no means less significant, there are the Slavic sources, composed in the infancy of Slavic literature, which were the fruit of the very Byzantine church policy of the period 843–886 with which this book deals. These are primarily the *lives* of the Slavic teachers, Constantine, Cyril and his brother Methodius, written shortly after the death of one or the other, in the last decades of the ninth century. Apart from being contemporary, both *lives* are also rich with an abundance of data of first-class historical importance, which, compared to other *lives*, prevail over commonplaces and glorification of the saints, venerating their heroes Constantine and Methodius not so much as saints but as historical figures, which sheds welcome light on many very significant aspects of the Byzantine ecclesiastical and especially missionary policy of the period under consideration. The verdict on their historical value has already been pronounced many times in the scholarship, and despite sporadic attempts, remains indisputable.

The period between 843 and 886 has always attracted the attention of researchers because of all the characteristics mentioned above. However, scholars have often overestimated the significance of the change of ruling imperial dynasty in 867, leading most reviewers of Byzantine history to divide the period into two parts, up to 867 and after that year. Thus, in the modern and useful *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit*, the material is divided into two parts—the first including personalities active between 641 and 867, and the second, personalities who acted between 867 and 1025. The editors were thus forced to depict many personalities who marked not only the period 843–886 but also the entire Middle Byzantine period, divided into two parts and published in two separate editions. Such a fate befell Photius, Ignatius, Basil I, Gregory Asbestas and many others.

When looking only at the ecclesiastical politics of the period 843–886, it should be noted that it has never been treated as a separate and unique entity. On the other hand, some of its aspects have attracted considerable attention from researchers and have been dealt with quite well. Such is the case with the question of the overthrow of the iconoclastic clergy after 843 or with the *Studite Schism*, which arose at the same time. Researchers have often referred to the personality of Patriarch Photius and his role in the Byzantine history of this period. In this field, the voluminous work of Joseph Hergenröther, created a century and a half ago, is indispensable. Nevertheless, the most prominent place in the research of Byzantine history, and above all the Byzantine church policy of the ninth century, certainly belongs to Francis Dvornik and his great monographs on Byzantine-Roman-Slavic relations, the *Schism of Photius*, the life and activities of Constantine and Methodius, Byzantine missionary activity among the Slavs and other topics. Besides Dvornik, many authors have devoted their works to the activities of the Byzantine missionaries Constantine and Methodius among the Slavs and the emergence of Slavic literacy and literature. This issue has been so thoroughly addressed in scholarship that it is a challenge to say anything new and original about it. The issue of the Christianization of the Bulgarians and the organization of the Bulgarian church is also well covered. In recent times, Evangelos Chryosos devoted a number of important studies to the research of the relationship between the Byzantine and Roman churches during the *Schism of Photius* in the 860-ies and 870-ies, and in special studies the issues of Byzantine-Armenian relations on ecclesiastical matters, the problem of the Paulicians on the eastern borders of the Empire and the Byzantine policy of conversion of the Jews during the reign of Basil I have been thoroughly addressed again. On the other hand, some phenomena of this period of Byzantine history have gone completely unnoticed, for example, the sudden expansion of the jurisdictional area of the Patriarchate of Constantinople during the time of Emperor Basil I. However, it is most indicative that after the mentioned impressive, both in terms of scope and importance, works of Hergenröther and Dvornik, there has been no comprehensive study dedicated to the history and all aspects of Byzantine church policy during the decades that followed the Triumph of Orthodoxy. In this study, I have tried to fill that gap as far as possibilities allowed and in accordance with the current state of research on individual issues, without pretensions to have reached any definitive judgment about them.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the editors of the edition *New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture*—Florin Curta, Leonora Neville and Shaun Tougher—for the honour they showed me by inviting me to participate with my contribution in the mentioned edition and the inspiring opportunity to once again dedicate myself to the issues with which I started my research work many years ago and the possibility of supplementing and improving my research and offering its results to the international research community and interested readers. I am indebted to the reviewers for their advice, suggestions and remarks, which proved so helpful to me. I also owe special thanks to Mr Charles Robertson, who was so kind to proofread the English text, and Dr Milan Vojnović, who created the maps.

Belgrade, Serbia
Summer 2024

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscrirpt.

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Introduction

The history of the Byzantine Empire, from its very beginnings, was the history *of the Christian Empire*. The founder of New Rome on the Bosporus, Constantine the Great, not only ended the centuries-long persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, but also made a decisive contribution to the organization of the Christian Church. In Nicaea, not far from his New Rome, Constantine presided over a great Council in 325, which, according to tradition, was attended by three hundred and eighteen Christian bishops. It was the best sign that, by entering the legal order of the Roman Empire, the Christian Church had also received an earthly emperor. In such circumstances, and shaped by Constantine's contemporary and biographer, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, the ideology of the Christian empire emerged, which holds that just as there is one God in heaven, so there is one Emperor on earth, who is chosen by God and the vicar of Christ. That one emperor can only be a Christian emperor and a Roman emperor, starting with Constantine the Great. In the following centuries, the Roman–Byzantine emperors followed in the footsteps of the first Christian emperor and were the true supreme heads of the Christian Church. Constantine's successors presided over ecumenical councils, founded bishoprics, appointed bishops, and their word was often decisive in matters of the ecclesiastical dogma itself and its formulations. The official version of the creed of the entire Church often depended precisely on the personal religious convictions of a particular emperor. The iconoclastic

P. Komatina, *Church Policy of Byzantium after the Triumph of Orthodoxy (843–886)*, New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-91254-2_1

movement, which marked Byzantine and Christian history in the period between 730 and 843, is perhaps the best example of this.[1]

Imposed on the Church by the Emperor Leo III the Isaurian (717–741),[2] later called the *Iconoclast*, stemming from his personal convictions, the movement that rejected the veneration of holy icons and condemned it as idolatry left a deep mark on Christian history. Appearing suddenly, at a time when all intra-Christian theological disputes already belonged to the past, and when it seemed that the Orthodox doctrine of Christianity had finally resisted and prevailed after so many temptations, the attack on the veneration of holy icons was experienced as the most detestable heresy. However, with unlimited imperial power behind it, iconoclasm endured within the Christian Church longer than any previous heresy.

Founded by Leo III the *Iconoclast*, iconoclasm was strongly supported by his son Constantine V, called "the Namesake of excrement" (Κοπρόνυμος) in later Orthodox historiography, during whose reign it was made official at the *headless* Council of Hieria in 754, where the veneration of icons was labelled heresy. Its momentum weakened during the reign of Leo IV, so that in 787, at the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, in the same place where the Three Hundred and Eighteen Fathers, under the watchful eye of Constantine the Great, had long ago established the official Orthodox creed of the Christian Church, it experienced a temporary collapse during the time of Irene, the wife of Leo IV profoundly devoted to Orthodoxy, and their son Constantine VI. However, this was not the final defeat of iconoclasm. Orthodoxy was maintained while Orthodox emperors sat on the throne—Irene (797–802) and Michael I Rangabe (811–813), and between them Nicephorus I (802–811), who did not show significant interest in religious disputes, and while the patriarchal see of Constantinople during that time was occupied by the Orthodox patriarchs Tarasius (784–806) and Nicephorus (806–815).

However, when the iconoclastic emperor, Leo V the Armenian (813–820), originally from the eastern, traditionally iconoclastic areas of the Empire, ascended to the imperial throne, iconoclasm once again became an official form of Christianity. The new emperor convened a new iconoclastic Council in Constantinople in 815, at which the decisions of

[1] On the role of emperors in the history of the Byzantine Church, cf. the study of Dagron 1996.

[2] PmbZ, no. 4242.

the Council of Nicaea of 787 were rejected and condemned, and those of Hieria of 754 were revived, and iconoclasm was once again declared an official form of Christianity—the Orthodox patriarch Nicephorus was deposed, and the iconoclast Theodotus Melissenus (815–821) was appointed in his stead. Other bishops were also replaced by the iconoclasts. The new emperor Michael II the Amorian (820–829), originally also from the East, from pro-iconoclast Phrygia, continued the iconoclastic direction of his predecessor, and the same religious policy was continued by his son and successor, the emperor Theophilus (829–842). During that time, the patriarchal throne of Constantinople was occupied by the iconoclast patriarchs Antony Cassymatas (821–837) and John VII the Grammarian (837–843).[3]

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[3] General overview of the Iconoclastic period, ODB II, 975–977 (P. A. Hollingsworth, A. Cutler). Collected works on iconoclasm, cf. Bryer, Herrin 1977, especially Mango 1977, 1–6; Auzépy 2007; Brubaker, Haldon 2015; Humphreys 2021. On the Second Iconoclasm 815–843, cf. Signes Codoñer 2014.

The End of Iconoclasm

As was the case many times in the history of the Christian Empire, a change on the throne brought a change in religious politics. The death of the Emperor Theophilus on 20 January 842 also marked the beginning of the end of the iconoclastic movement. The emperor's wife Theodora, who was deeply loyal and committed to Orthodoxy, assumed the imperial power in the name of their young son Michael III. She had a clear goal to end the iconoclastic movement at the very beginning of her reign.

The following lines from the *Life of Patriarch Methodius* most vividly testify to what a turning point in the life of the Byzantine Church the death of the emperor Theophilus was:

> *The Lord sent death to the emperor, and it also came to his heresy. Because when this one died, this heresy ended with him. Since the child Michael with his mother received the Empire, the Orthodox Church of Christ obtained the freedom of confession, and the perversion of heresy was removed as if by a human hand and was rebuked by force, and those willing to talk and listen about them, were prevented.*[1]

[1] Ἐν τούτοις τοῦ ἁγίου ἀνδρὸς ἐξεταζομένου, θάνατον ἀπέστειλε Κύριος ἐπὶ τὸν βασιλέα, καὶ ἦλθεν ἐπὶ τὴν αἵρεσιν αὐτοῦ· ἅμα γὰρ ἐτεθνήκει, συντελευτᾷ αὐτῳ καὶ ἡ αἵρεσις. Τοῦ γὰρ παιδὸς Μιχαὴλ σὺν τῇ μητρὶ τὴν βασιλείαν παραλάβοντος, ἡ ὀρθόδοξος Χριστοῦ Ἐκκλησία παῤῥησίαν λαμβάνει, καὶ τὸ κίββηλον τῆς αἱρέσεως ὡς ἀνθροπίνη χειρὶ φυέν τε καὶ κρατηθὲν ἀπηλέγχετο,

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However, not everything was so simple. More than a year passed between the death of the emperor Theophilus, on 20 January 842, and the day of the official re-establishment of the cult of icons and thus the restoration of Orthodoxy, on 11 March 843.

After Theophilus, the iconoclast movement remained firmly institutionalized—the Church remained in the hands of the iconoclast bishops, led by the patriarch John VII the Grammarian,[2] the Orthodox bishops had been deposed after the renewal of iconoclasm in 815, or else forced to accept the new iconoclast dogma, and all priests appointed after 815 were ordained by the iconoclast bishops; lay clergy were obliged to follow the religious confession of their bishops. Within the fold of the Church, only the monks mostly remained loyal to the Orthodox faith and the veneration of the holy icons, and throughout the time of iconoclasm they had remained steadfast in preserving their faith and rejecting the iconoclastic heresy, suffering many persecutions from the iconoclastic emperors as a result.

The most important monastic centres at that time were the capital's monasteries, such as Studion and Dalmatou, and among those outside Constantinople, the monasteries of the Bithynian mountains, Olympus and Ida, stood out in particular. The monks of these centres, as well as solitary hermits, were the leaders of the monastic community.[3] Chroniclers from the tenth century, Genesius and the Continuator of Theophanes, attribute the decisive impetus for the change in church policy towards the re-establishment of the cult of icons to the monks of the Studite Monastery in Constantinople.[4] However, the lives of the prominent Studite monks of the time, composed in the second half of the ninth century, describing the events surrounding the establishment of the cult of icons, do not assign their heroes any such role.[5] The monks had always been the bearers of the

καὶ οἱ λαλεῖν καὶ ἀκούειν βουλόμενοι περὶ τούτων, ἐκωλύοντο…, Vita Methodii, 1252 D–1253 A.

[2] On Patriarch John VII the Grammarian, cf. PmbZ, no. 3199; Signes Codoñer 2014.

[3] About the most important monasteries and monks of the first half of the ninth century, especially about the Studites and the Bithynian Olympus, cf. Morris 1995, 9–18, 35–39. Cf. also Janin 1953–1975 I, 86–89, 444–455; II, 127–191.

[4] Theophanes Continuatus, IV.1; Genesius, IV.2. On later historiography about the events of 842–843, cf. Torgerson, Humphreys 2021, 199–201.

[5] The most important of these lives is the *Life of Nicholas the Studite*, Vita Nicolai Studitae, 863–925 (for the events surrounding the establishment of the cult of icons, cf. 901 B–D); Prieto Domínguez 2020, 308–314. On that issue, cf. also Morris 1995, 10–11.

iconodule movement, but they were never able to prevail over the secular authorities and make a decisive contribution to the establishment of the veneration of icons. The decision on that lay in the hands of the secular authorities.

Empress Theodora and Her Associates

Theophilus' death was disastrous for the survival of iconoclasm because it left the Empire and the Church without a strong iconoclastic emperor. His son and successor, the new emperor Michael III (842–867), was only a two-year-old child,[6] whose true reign still belonged to the far distant future and Theophilus died too early to be able to educate his successor in the iconoclastic spirit and thus ensure the continuation of his religious policy. Along with the minor emperor, according to the known practice,[7] his mother, the dowager empress Theodora, and her daughter, the eldest sister of the new emperor, Thecla, took over the imperial power. Thanks to circumstance, the supreme power in the Empire belonged to the leading member of this tripartite imperial body, the empress Theodora, deeply devoted to the Orthodox faith and the veneration of icons, as evidenced in all the sources that speak of her. In those sources, it is especially emphasized that she persisted in her faith and respect for icons even during the reign of her husband, a fierce persecutor of the icon-worshippers.[8] The position in which Theodora found herself after Theophilus' death allowed her not only to freely exercise her religious views, but also to pass them on to her children, among whom was the emperor himself, but also, what was most important, to the entire Church and Christian Empire. Although the later historiographical tradition would find behind the personage of the empress other initiators of these significant changes in the history of the Christian Empire and the Church, such as her collaborator the logothete Theoctistus, or her brother Bardas, and even the empress' uncle Manuel,

[6] Michael III was born on 9 January 840, cf. Mango 1967, 253–258; Treadgold 1979, 183, 1988, 319.

[7] Cf. the example of the emperor Constantine VI and his mother the Empress Irene, PmbZ, no. 1439, 3704.

[8] About Theodora, cf. PmbZ, no. 7286.

who had died in 838,[9] it was primarily her action and exclusively her merit that contemporaries recognized in this act.[10]

[9] According to Symeon, 131.2, Theodora established the Orthodox faith *with her opinion and guidance and encouragement by Theoctistus, caniclius and logothete* (…γνώμῃ μὲν ἑαυτῆς, ὑποθήκῃ δὲ καὶ παραινέσει Θεοκτίστου κανικλείου καὶ λογοθέτου…). Theophanes Continuatus, IV.1–3 and Genesius, IV.2–3, attribute the leading role in the change of religious politics to Bardas and *Manuel*, and mention also a certain *Constantine the Armenian*, a drungary of the Watch, the father of Thomas, the latter logothete of the Drome and the ancestor of the historian Genesius, about which, cf. Markopoulos 1986, 103–108. An overview of the events that followed the death of Emperor Theophilus and the establishment of the cult of icons, mainly based on the data of the chroniclers of the tenth century, is provided by Varona Codeso 2009, 59–96.

[10] The role of the empress and her young son Michael III in the establishment of icons is already celebrated by the *canon* dedicated to that event composed by Theophanes *Graptus* on the celebration of its first anniversary in 844, cf. Gouillard 1961, 381. This is explicitly testified to by the contemporary and one of the oldest preserved texts that mention the establishment of the cult of icons, the *Life of St. Joannicius* by the monk Peter, written between 847 and 852/853, perhaps even as early as the first half of 847, before the death of Patriarch Methodius on June 14, 847, Talbot 1998, 247; Timotin 2010, 184; Price 2021, 258–259; Prieto Domínguez 2020, 120–127. The author of this text writes that his hero, St. Joannicius, died *on the third day of the month of November, the tenth indiction* (i.e. 846), *during the reign of our Orthodox Emperor Michael, the young and meekest infant of Orthodoxy, and the aptly named Theodora* ("Gift of God"), *she who was truly given to the world by God as a divine gift of Orthodoxy and who granted complete peace to the Church, together with her offspring, who are God-protected and God-crowned*, Vita Ioannicii, 433; Talbot 1998, 344–345.

The *Life of Michael the Synkellos* († 846), which was compiled by an unknown monk of the Chora Monastery in Constantinople, *no more than one generation after the saint's death*, that is, certainly before the death of the Emperor Michael III in 867, Life of Michael, 5–6; Sode 2001, 146–147; Prieto Domínguez 2020, 358–361, also recognizes the exclusive merit of the empress Theodora in the establishment of icons: since she and her son Michael assumed the imperial power, *Theodora placed a diligent and prudent thought before all other benefits and favors, which the emperors usually reach for to be glorified, to announce her authority as sure and to show male nobility in a female transformation, not otherwise than by the grace of God, she achieved this through a splendid presentation of pious dogmas and honorable icons and united those already divided into one unity, so that through the union of these the firm and unshakable correctness of the faith of the apostolic and paternal dogmas be preserved*, Life of Michael, 100.6–16.

There is a similar statement in the *Sermon on the Exile of the Patriarch Nikephoros* by the presbyter Theophanes, Discourse on the exile, 336–338. Jean Gouillard, Synodikon, 122, n. 19, believes that in the aforementioned section the *Life of Michael the Synkellos* relies entirely on the corresponding section of Theophanes' *Sermon*. However, that claim was difficult to reconcile with the dating of the *Life of Michael the Synkellos* to the time before 867, given that the creation of Theophanes' *Sermon* was usually dated to the end of the ninth century, Synodikon, 122. On the other hand, Kazhdan 1999, 257–258, considered, though uncon-

The first step that the empress took on the way to establishing the cult of icons and the Orthodox faith was to consult on the issue with her close associates, i.e. with the people who helped her manage the Empire. After she herself decided to raise the issue of restoring the Orthodox faith, the empress *talked about this matter with those who held magisterial positions and dignities*, as stated in *Sermon on the exile of Patriarch Nikephoros* by the presbyter Theophanes composed in 847.[11] This meeting between the empress and the highest state dignitaries, held sometime during 842, was decisive for her endeavour. If she secured the undivided support of the holders of the highest state positions, the empress' plan to restore the cult of icons and the Orthodox faith would be a guaranteed success. Otherwise, if one of the high-ranking officials opposed her decision and showed loyalty to iconoclasm and the memory of the late Emperor Theophilus, it would inevitably lead to dissension at the top of the state government and serious destabilization of the Empire. The meeting was exclusively of a state nature, where the empress's initiative to restore the cult of icons was discussed as a state issue. Representatives of the church and monasticism did not participate in it.[12]

vincingly, that the *Life of Michael the Synkellos* is a work of somewhat later creation, so the use of Theophanes' *Sermon* in its composition could be explained by that. Prieto Domínguez 2020, 114–116, 143–149, argued, however, that the presbyter Theophanes, the author of the *Sermon*, was a member of the literary circle of the patriarch Methodius. The issue was finally solved by D. Afinogenov who has recently decisively proven that the *Sermon on the Exile of the Patriarch Nikephoros* by the presbyter Theophanes was composed as early as 847, after the translation of the relics of patriarch Nicephorus on 13 March and before the death of patriarch Methodius on 14 June, and was used as a source by the author of the *Life of Michael the Synkellos*, Discourse on the exile, 325–330.

[11] Discourse on the exile, 338.

[12] J. Gouillard, in his commentary with the edition of the *Synodicon of Orthodoxy*, believes that the representatives of the monks also participated in this gathering, i.e. that this was *a preliminary gathering of representatives of the authorities and the monastic order*, Synodikon, 122. However, the almost contemporary *Sermon on the exile of Patriarch Nicephorus and the transfer of his relics* by the presbyter Theophanes clearly testifies that the Empress arranged this meeting with *bearers of worldly dignities*, and that she approached the most prominent representatives of the monastic order regarding the restoration of the cult of icons only *after she had discussed the matter with those who held magisterial positions and dignities*, Discourse on the exile, 338. The same can be concluded from the text of the *Life of Michael the Synkellos*, according to which the empress issued the order to release the imprisoned monks and the order to gather the representatives of monasticism at the council in Constantinople only after she had considered her intention to establish the cult of icons *with wise shrewdness and prudent consciousness*, Life of Michael, 100.17 sq. In this last statement, an allusion to the aforementioned meeting of the empress with her secular dignitaries could be recognized. In the

Who were those people who *held magisterial positions and dignities*, to whom Empress Theodora first turned when she wanted to restore the cult of icons? Describing the events in connection with the great church council that followed Theodora's aforementioned consultation with court dignitaries, the *Lives of David, Symeon and George* lists in one place the names of these dignitaries who, along with the empress, decisively contributed to the victory of Orthodoxy—Sergius Nicetiates,[13] Theoctistus,[14] Bardas,[15] and Petronas,[16] characterizing them all together as *the most Orthodox people, who happened to be the foremost of the Council of Senate*.[17] There is no

Lives of David, Symeon and George, there is a mention of the letters that the empress sent to the monk Symeon, inviting him to come to Constantinople with the other monks who were with him, Acta Davidis, 243.8–10, which served A.-M. Talbot, in her commentary with the English translation of this work, as a basis for the assumption that with those letters the empress initiated a series of events that would lead to the restoration of the cult of icons, i.e. that they were an invitation to certain monks to come to the meeting that the empress arranged with her secular collaborators on this matter, Talbot 1998, 211, n. 338. However, it is already clear from the following lines of the same text that the aforementioned *letters* should be recognized as those letters, invitations and orders that the empress sent to the monks *after* she had held a meeting with secular dignitaries, at which the decision was made to implement the restoration of the cult of icons, which is mentioned in *Life of Michael the Synkellos*. Namely, acting according to the will of the empress and sailing towards Constantinople, Symeon saw in a dream St. Antony. Asked by Symeon where he was traveling, the saint replied: *To Byzantium, to establish Orthodoxy and prepare a place for you and those with you in the Caniclium*, Acta Davidis, 243.12–20. On the other hand, his brother George, to whom the empress' wish had previously been announced by Symeon himself through his letter, Acta Davidis, 243.10–12, sailing to Constantinople, dreamed of St. Spyridon, who, when asked why he had come, answered: *I come to fight together with you at the council that is to be assembled in Byzantium*, Acta Davidis, 243.30–31. From this it is clear that, in response to the empress' letters, they went to the *great church council*, which she decided to call *after a meeting with her highest secular dignitaries*, and which, according to the following text of the *Life of David, Symeon and George*, was to take place exactly in the building of the Caniclium, Acta Davidis, 246.11–12 sq.

[13] On Sergius Nicetiates, cf. PmbZ, no. 6664.

[14] On Theoctistus, cf. ODB III, 2056 (P. Hollingsworth); PmbZ, no. 8050. The only previous attempt to write Theoctistus' biography was made a long time ago by Mališevskij 1887, 265–297. Cf. also Guilland 1971, 48–50.

[15] On Bardas, cf. ODB I, 255–256 (P. Hollingsworth, A. Cutler); PmbZ, no. 791.

[16] On Petronas, cf. ODB III, 1644–1645 (P. Hollingsworth); PmbZ, no. 5929; Halkin 1944, 199–202. Treadgold 1988, 326, n. 451, suggests that at the time of the death of the Emperor Theophilus, Petronas was also a domestic of the Schools.

[17] …Σέργιον τὸν Νικητιάτην, Θεόκτιστον, Βάρδαν καὶ Πετρωνᾶν, ἄνδρας ὀρθοδοξοτάτους καὶ τῆς συγκλήτου τυγχάνοντας πρώτους βουλῆς…, Acta Davidis, 245.31–246.2; Prieto Domínguez 2020, 253.

doubt that Theophanes' *Sermon*, too, speaking of the people who *held magisterial positions and dignities*, is also referring to them. According to chroniclers a century younger, the first three men, with the exception of Petronas, were the people to whom Emperor Theophilus, aware that his end was nearing and that he was leaving behind him the empress-widow and a weak, only two-year-old son, wishing that, despite this, their position on the throne would remain safe, appointed on his deathbed as *guardians and deputies of the daily imperial duties* of his young son. To tell the truth, the aforementioned chroniclers do not mention Sergius Nicetiates along with Bardas and Theoctistus, and his place in their accounts is taken by *Manuel*, magister and domestic of the Schools, the uncle of Empress Theodora.[18] However, Manuel had died in the conflict with the Arabs near Anzen, on 27 July 838, and could by no chance have been a participant in the events that occurred later. Byzantine chroniclers of the tenth century attributed to him the role played in these events by Sergius Nicetiates.[19] He was, along with Bardas and Theoctistus, one of the members of the imperial regency, and one of those who had the main say in the matter of restoring the cult of icons. Petronas,[20] the empress' and Bardas' younger brother, was not formally involved in exercising the highest authority, but as brother to both the empress and one of the

[18] Theophanes Continuatus, IV.1; Genesius, IV.1, omits Bardas from the regency. On Manuel the Armenian, cf. Signes Codoñer 2014, 83–101, 132–136.

[19] Grégoire 1933, 520–524; Treadgold 1988, 267–278, 293–304; Prieto Domínguez 2020, 186–187, 241–255. On the date of Manuel's death, cf. Halkin 1954, 9–11. Varona Codeso 2009, 60–71, giving full confidence to the chroniclers of the tenth century, maintains that the mentioned Manuel really participated in the events of 842–843, while Signes Codoñer 2012, 231–242, tries to completely rehabilitate the value of the data about Manuel's life and activities after 838.

[20] According to the later chronicle tradition, Emperor Theophilus entrusted Theoctistus and Petronas to remove the prominent military leader, the patrician Theophobus the Persian, whom he suspected of wanting to harm the empress and the young heir to the throne and take the throne after his death, Symeon 130.43–44; Treadgold 1988, 326. About Theophobus, cf. Grégoire 1934, 185–197; ODB III, 2067–2068 (P. Hollingsworth, A. Cutler); PmbZ, no. 8237; Signes Codoñer 2014, 111–124, 132–180; Prieto Domínguez 2020, 251–252. After the death of magister Manuel, domestic of the Schools in 838, Treadgold 1988, 301, in addition to the emperor's son-in-law and possible successor, caesar Alexius Mouzele, until he assumed the monastic vows after the birth of the true heir to the throne Michael in 840, Theophobus was the most prominent military leader and associate of Emperor Theophilus, cf. Signes Codoñer 2014. Of particular importance is the information of later chroniclers that he was *Orthodox* and therefore *loved by the people of Constantinople no less than by the Persians* which he commanded, Symeon, 130.29.

regents, his place was in their immediate vicinity and his role in management and decision-making was certainly not negligible. Therefore, along with Empress Theodora, the mentioned four were persons in whose hands lay the entire power after the death of the Emperor Theophilus. Given that the mentioned dignitaries were her collaborators and assistants in the exercise of imperial power, it is quite understandable that Empress Theodora first turned to them and consulted with them on the issue of restoring the cult of icons and the Orthodox faith. What answer could she expect from them, that is, what were the understandings of these four people when it came to respecting the cult of icons?

In the *Lives of David, Symeon and George*, all four are labelled as *the most Orthodox people*. The *Life of Empress Theodora* called Theoctistus *a fervent zealot of Orthodox faith*.[21] In the *Synaxarium of the Church of Constantinople*, Sergius Nicetiates was remembered as *a prominent zealot of the Orthodox faith and who fought a lot for the establishment of the Orthodoxy of holy and venerable icons*.[22] However, such formulations could also be a later echo of the role and merits of those figures in establishing the cult of icons, and they do not have to be taken as direct evidence of their religious beliefs during Theophilus' life and at the time of his death. Some other circumstances should be taken into account here. Bardas and Petronas were the brothers of Empress Theodora. Their rise in the hierarchy of the Empire was made possible thanks to her position, and that of their uncle Manuel, and their mother, zosta patricia Theoctista. It is known that their entire family was always devoted to Orthodoxy, and that even during Theophilus' reign, a circle of iconodules formed around them, whose most prominent members were zosta patricia Theoctista, but also the stepmother of the Emperor Theophilus himself, Euphrosyne.[23] In addition, Sergius Nicetiates, a magister, was also a relative of Theodora.[24]

Of the four people who, together with Empress Theodora, made the decision to restore the cult of icons, only Theoctistus can be found to have a trace of an iconoclastic past. Theoctistus, a eunuch, magister and

[21] …Θεόκτιστος ὁ λογοθέτης, ὁ καὶ Κανίκλειος, θερμὸς τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως ζηλωτὴς τυγχάνων…, Vita Theodorae, 10.72–73; Prieto Domínguez 2020, 253–255.

[22] …ὃς καὶ ζηλωτὴς διάπυρος τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως γέγονε καὶ πολλὰ ἠγωνίσατο εἰς τὸ τὴν ὀρθοδοξίαν γενέσθαι τῶν ἁγίων καὶ σεπτῶν εἰκόνων…, Synaxarium CP, 778.1–4; Prieto Domínguez 2020, 187, 244, 253.

[23] Treadgold 1988, 271. On the religious significance of Petronas, cf. Prieto Domínguez 2020, 255–260.

[24] Synaxarium CP, 777.13–778.1; PmbZ, no. 6664; Prieto Domínguez 2020, 244.

logothete of the Drome, whose rise in the hierarchy of the dignitaries of the Empire, from the chartularius of the Caniclium during the reign of Michael II until that of the logothete of the Drome before the middle of 838, was tied exclusively to service and loyalty to the iconoclastic emperors Michael II and Theophilus, participated in the persecutions of the iconodules carried out by these emperors. In December 831, as chartularius of the Caniclium, along with the then logothete of the Drome Arsaber Morocharzanius, he participated in the interrogation of the captured iconodule monks Methodius, the future Orthodox patriarch, and Euthymius of Sardis,[25] and in July 839, when he himself was a logothete of the Drome, in the interrogation of two captured monks from Jerusalem, the brothers Theodore and Theophanes, in the process that ended on 18 July 839 with the carving of iambic verses on the faces of the two brothers, who were to remain remembered and respected ever after as the *Grapti* (*Γράπτοι*, that is, "the Inscribed Ones"), saints and confessors of Orthodoxy.[26] Describing the troubles he suffered at that time in Constantinople, Theodore *Graptus* himself, in the letter he sent after these events to John, the metropolitan of Cyzicus,[27] also described his meeting

[25] Vie d'Euthyme de Sardes, § 18, ll. 339–349; Acta Davidis, 238.4–16; Treadgold 1988, 277, 435, n. 383; Prieto Domínguez 2020, 105–108.

[26] Vita Theodori Grapti, 672 B–680 A; Life of Michael, 78.23–96.4; Praise of Theodore Graptos, 133–146; Symeon 130.37–39. Of the above sources, the first two state the month and date, but only the *Life of Michael the Synkellos* also states that it was the *fourteenth* indiction, Life of Michael, 96.3–4, which would be the year 836. However, Treadgold 1979, 187–189, convincingly showed that the mentioned information from the *Life of Michael the Synkellos* is wrong, since all other sources testify that it was after John the Grammarian became the patriarch of Constantinople in 838, and that the events related to the suffering of the Grapti brothers should be placed in 839. The question of the chronology remains open, since M. Cunningham, Life of Michael, 15–16, n. 51, insists on the year 836, Sode 2001, 233–234, rejects such dating, while Prieto Domínguez 2020, 159–163, accepts it.

The *Life of Theodore Graptus* and the *Life of Michael the Synkellos* state that on 14 July the brothers were interrogated by the *logothete of the Drome*, Vita Theodori Grapti, 676 C; Life of Michael, 90.32–92.1, but do not mention his name. However, in July 839 it could only be Theoctistus, who appears in that position for the first time in July–August 838, Theophanes Continuatus, III.27; Genesius, III.15; Treadgold 1988, 301, 443 n. 411. M. Cunningham, Life of Michael, 158–159, n. 153, sticking to the dating of these events in 836, also considers the mentioned logothete of the Drome to be Theoctistus, since he could have held that position for some time before he first appeared as such in 838, and before that there was mentioned in the sources as the logothete of the Drome Arsaber in 831, Treadgold 1988, 277.

[27] The entire letter is reproduced in the *Life of Theodore Graptus*, Vita Theodori Grapti, 672 B–680 A, which the *Life of Michael the Synkellos* is completely based on and which it follows almost verbatim in the respective chapters, Life of Michael, 80.22–96.4.

with the *logothete of the Drome*, i.e. Theoctistus. The logotete questioned Theodore and Theophanes as to *why they rejoiced at the death of the Emperor Leo* (the Armenian, in 820) and *why they did not want to accept his religion* (iconoclasm), *since it was during his reign that they fled to Constantinople*. The brothers readily answered that they *neither rejoiced at the death of the Emperor Leo, nor did they accept his faith, nor did they come during his reign, but during the reign of the one before him* (i.e. the Orthodox Emperor Michael I, 811–813).[28] To that, the logothete only replied: *Well, well, leave*.[29] From these words it was assumed in historiography that the logothete Theoctistus, although doing his duty as a loyal imperial official, sympathized to a certain extent with the two persecuted and punished iconodule monks, and that Theodore *Graptus* himself was aware of this.[30] However, it seems that the compiler of the *Life of Michael the Synkellos* already understood these words of Theoctistus in a different way, since he paraphrases them as follows: *Go, then, on the path that was assigned to you by the emperor*.[31] Since they were then taken to the Praetorium, in order for their suffering to continue, culminating four days later with the engraving of iambic verses onto their faces,[32] after which they were again sent into exile, to Apameia in Bithynia,[33] it is clear which way *was designated by the emperor* for them. It cannot be said that logothete Theoctistus found an appropriate way to express sympathy for the sufferings of Theodore and Theophanes by alluding to the new misfortunes that still awaited them. Indeed, it is hard to discern any benevolence in his attitude towards the iconodules in the way he conducted the interrogation of the *Grapti* brothers. How then did it happen that a loyal servant of the iconoclastic emperors and their regime, who at the end of the fourth decade of the ninth century faithfully carried out the tasks entrusted to him in the pursuit of the iconodules, had grown into *a fervent zealot of the Orthodox faith* by 843? In the aforementioned interrogation conducted by Theoctistus, the *Grapti* brothers answered him at one point: *We do not agree to distort and innovate the faith because of you who are transformed by circumstances*.[34]

[28] Vita Theodori Grapti, 676 B–C; Life of Michael, 90.24–32; Prieto Domínguez 2020, 159–163.

[29] Vita Theodori Grapti, 676 C.

[30] Treadgold 1988, 311, 447, n. 428.

[31] Life of Michael, 92.1–2.

[32] Vita Theodori Grapti, 676 C–680 A; Life of Michael, 92.2–96.4.

[33] Vita Theodori Grapti, 680 A.

[34] Vita Theodori Grapti, 676 B.