Jnl of Ecclesiastical History, Vol. 65, No. 4, October 2014. © Cambridge University Press 2014
doi:10.1017/S0022046913001589

REVIEW ARTICLE

What Caused Iconoclasm?

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Mosaics as history. The Near East from late antiquity to Islam. By G. W. Bowersock. (Revealing Antiquity, 16.) Pp. xiv+146 incl. 50 colour ills. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006. £25.95. 978 0 674 02292 8

Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850. A history. By Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon. Pp. xxiv+918 incl. 70 ills, 69 figs and 7 maps. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. £100. 978 0 521 43093 7

Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians. By Thomas F. X. Noble. (The Middle Ages Series.) Pp. vii+488. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. £42.50 ($65). 978 0 8122 4141 9

These books are all concerned with iconoclasm, the destruction of figural images, which snakes across a vast historic map of regions and centuries provoking many questions in its wake. None of the three provides entirely satisfying answers yet all contribute something new to the problem of why iconoclasm occured during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, an era of transition when the old certitudes of empire fell apart, leaving fragile new authorities to confront novel dangers. They all devote much analysis to perceptions of art, mainly religious, during this tumultuous period of change, ranging from Egypt and Anatolia in the south-east Mediterranean to York in northern England via Jerusalem, Constantinople, Rome, Aachen and a host of other less famous sites. They are united by a basic consideration, the bedrock of the second commandment of the Old Testament against the making and worshipping of graven images, and the pagan practices so roundly condemned by Moses, which had a deep influence in both Christian and Muslim societies. They present an ideal opportunity to reconsider how the prohibition of the Book of Exodus formed later appreciations of artistic endeavour.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046913001589 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The shortest is a slim volume with the beguiling title, *Mosaics as history*, which examines the varied use of mosaic decoration in Roman villas, synagogues, churches and public buildings throughout the Near East. G. W. Bowersock has a masterly command of this body of material that has been enormously expanded by rich archaeological discoveries in recent years. Through mosaic images inspired by Greek myths found in private houses in Antioch and Sepphoris, the famous Madaba map (with named cities depicted in their correct geographical relationship) and familiar zodiac floors from synagogues, he traces the later development in newly excavated church pavements in Palestine, Syria and Jordan. Many mosaics are dated by inscriptions recording those who paid for the work. The chapter on iconoclasm is centred on the careful replacement of figural by natural images, attributed to Jewish craftsmen. Readers who have not seen such spectacular mosaics as the creations of Prometheus or the cities at Umm er-Rasas will delight in Bowersock's elegant and beautifully presented argument.

At the other end of the Mediterranean, north of the Alps and thus beyond the Greco-Roman and Judaic world, Thomas Noble records western reactions to eastern iconoclasm in *Images, Iconoclasm and the Carolingians*. After summarising the two phases of Byzantine hostility to icons (pp. 726–87, 815–43), he concentrates on a close analysis of the western treatises written in response. Discussion of the correct use of art in early medieval churches is closely integrated with the theological concerns during the period of Carolingian supremacy, symbolised by Charlemagne's coronation by Pope Leo III in AD 800. Noble coins the neologism 'art talk' to describe the debate that reached a high point at the end of the eighth century in the *Libri Carolini* (here rendered as the Work of King Charles, *Opus Caroli regis*), which became the guiding principle of religious art executed during his long reign. Thanks to the detailed work of Anne Freeman and Paul Meyvaert, this critical text can now be firmly attributed to Theodulph, bishop of Orléans, who constructed a chapel at Germigny des Près with an iconoclast, i.e. non-figural, mosaic decoration. Noble devotes the central argument of his study to this key text (ch. iv), followed by a discussion of Tradition, Order and Worship in the age of Charlemagne, the impact of the Second Iconoclasm and the arguments about art in the age of Louis the Pious, Charlemagne's son. The short conclusion summarises the author's claim to a new interpretation of the debates over western medieval art in a detailed and convincing analysis.

The largest of the three books is a history, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, from *c.* 680 to 850, a period dominated by the challenge of Islam. Its direct concern with artistic representation is therefore somewhat subordinated to the major political, economic and military developments of these turbulent centuries. Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon have previously

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discussed all the sources for such a study,[1] so this massive, heavy tome is the product of a long intense collaboration. The final result is rather unbalanced. After an introduction to the whole period, chapters v–ix trace the history of the Iconoclast Era, *c.* 680–*c.* 850, while chapters x–xi are an authoritative analysis of the sweeping administrative changes required to maintain the empire under repeated threats from Muslim, Slav and Bulgar forces. This is the most original part of the book and every future history of Byzantium will rely upon it. While artistic evidence is brought into play whenever appropriate, the discussion of iconoclasm *per se* in chapter xii is surprisingly brief.

The authors follow recent research in attributing to Leo III (717–41) the onset of official iconoclasm in Byzantium. As the founder of the Syrian dynasty (also called Isaurian, since the family had been forcibly moved from Germanikeia in northern Syria to Isauria in central Anatolia), he was responsible for the initial phase of a major reform of imperial structures, which was extended by his son Constantine V, the theologian of iconoclasm. As a result, later iconophile chroniclers generally condemned both rulers as impious and ignored their achievements. The victorious icon venerators also made sure that iconoclast propaganda and justification would be entirely obliterated, leaving an extremely prejudiced account, full of interpolations and corruptions which historians have been unpicking for decades. Brubaker and Haldon's very necessary re-reading of the surviving texts depends too heavily on some of Paul Speck's more hypothetical arguments about iconophile rewriting. But in their study the iconoclast rulers receive due praise for securing the empire against the Arabs, who were intent on conquering Constantinople. The remaining enigma is the role of iconoclasm in this great victory. Why did these emperors initiate and support the destruction of icons?

Clearly, the breaking of icons or the battle over images (*eikonomachia* in Greek) is an issue in all three books. They all raise the same question: how did late antique and early medieval craftsmen and their patrons relate the production of their art to the Old Testament prohibition on making and venerating graven images? For Jewish communities who paid for the floor mosaics of their sixth-century synagogues, it appears that the zodiac with its all too human representations had become an established choice, justified perhaps as purely decorative and therefore unlikely to stimulate veneration. For Christians the New Testament record of Christ's earthly existence in which God 'represented' himself amongst us could and should be taught through art, considered especially important for the illiterate. Some authorities preferred the symbol of the Lamb of God, but in 692 the Byzantine Church pronounced this less effective than the representation of

[1] Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era: the sources*, Farnham–Burlington, VT 2001.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046913001589 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christ in his human form, which revealed the purpose of the Incarnation. Justinian II not only presided over the council responsible for this ruling but also placed images of Christ on his coinage, employing both a youthful curly-haired model and a mature long-haired type (these are reproduced and discussed in *The sources*). Given the new dispensation of Christ's earthly life, death and resurrection, the second commandment could be relegated to a long distant era in the history of the Jews.

In the same century, however, the new revelation of Islam had re-emphasised the serious obligation to avoid all representation of living things, forbidden by the Mosaic law, precisely because of the dangers of idolatry. Only Allah, the God of the Jews and Christians alike, could receive true veneration. This strenuous observance of the Old Testament prohibition was put into action when, like Moses and the Golden Calf, the Prophet cleansed the shrine at Mecca of its pagan paintings and statues of gods and goddesses. According to later tradition he also instituted a ban on images of the living and the dead. The Kaaba represented this new insistence that restricted Muslim art to natural and architectural decoration, often accompanied by texts of the Qur'an. The Arabic script became a calligraphic form of art in itself (see the exquisite early documents), and after some experimentation Caliph Abd al-Malik (685–705) replaced his own image on the coinage with quotations from the Qur'an. And this development occurred precisely when Justinian II set the image of Christ on his gold coinage. While some figural art persisted in the secular contexts of desert palaces and private spaces, the public celebration of Islam took place in mosques and shrines devoid of human representation, such as the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem and the Great Mosque at Damascus.

Curiously, Bowersock omits the Jerusalem monument from his fascinating survey of mosaics, though he notes the introduction of Arabic rather than Greek as the language of Caliph Abd al-Malik's administration (p. 66). Yet the decoration of the Dome of the Rock constructed in AD 692 on the same ruler's orders displays a dazzling, non-figural, mosaic decoration of nature's bounty and Islam's superiority. If mosaics can be seen as history, here they make a forceful demonstration: Qur'anic inscriptions claim the incorporation of Christianity into Islam, with lavish images of flowers, trees, crowns and naturalistic patterns on a gold ground. The selection of unusual quotations that praise Jesus as a prophet and Mary his mother but deny that he was the son of God, indicate a deliberate choice. The site therefore enshrines a very significant historical moment when the religion and language of the Muslim occupiers of the Holy Land sought to replace the Christian faith and re-established the Mosaic taboo.

Ever since 1957, when André Grabar traced the rivalry between the Arab world and Byzantium, visible in shifting imagery particularly on the coinage, mutual influences have provided a backdrop to the larger

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question of iconoclasm. How did it arise? How was it spread? What impact did it have in communities other than Muslim? These concerns are addressed in all three books to different degrees. Bowersock records the careful replacement of figures and beasts in mosaics by trees and flowers – or simply removing images of living things by defacing them (pp. 100–1). Sometimes the work was done carefully, stone by stone, in other places odd limbs and fragments were left behind in a clumsy fashion. Both styles are a form of iconoclasm. And Finbarr Flood has recently drawn attention to hadith, Islamic traditions, instructing how to transform a person into a tree, which clarify the Muslim attitude to ancient mosaics.[2] Both the Jewish and Muslim authorities therefore were aware of the improper nature of human representation, and took steps to remove it. How does this type of replacement relate to the outright removal and destruction of religious icons in Byzantium?

Control of artistic practice is of course only one small element of general government policy in all early medieval societies, so it is important to set iconoclasm within its wider context. The Byzantine Empire, threatened with military destruction, required a whole raft of very significant reforms to sustain and strengthen imperial rule. The central chapters of *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era* provide the most detailed, up-to-date and exhaustive account of this impressive achievement. Here the basic problems are confronted: control of the coinage, seen as a key to economic prosperity; the ruralisation of society (apart from the capital) and changes in local elites and their diets; the transformation of the old senatorial classes into 'an ecclesiastical and governmental service elite', accompanied by many shifts in titles, offices and identities, and the role of soldiers in a society organised for war.

In addition, long sections on fiscal and strategic management include a novel attribution to Nikephoros I (802–11) of the creation of the *themata* in their new Middle Byzantine form, and an extraordinarily wide-ranging analysis of how such administrative units came into being. This measure of the shift between older Roman methods of organising the armed forces and specifically medieval Byzantine ones has been the subject of intense scrutiny for many decades. Given the paucity of references to this fundamental change in sources for the seventh and eighth centuries, many experts have proposed a very gradual, even 200-year-long reform. Brubaker and Haldon have now resolved the problem by interpreting the identity of *strategoi* (previously seen as a sign of the new thematic administration) as generals in the traditional Roman sense. In this account older military units and methods of organisation survived the first onslaught of Arab attacks, while some new guard troops (*tagmata*) were

[2] Helen C. Evans and Brandie Ratliff (eds), *Byzantium and Islam: age of transition* (exhibition catalogue), Metropolitan Museum of New York, 2012.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046913001589 Published online by Cambridge University Press

created, until Nikephoros I came to power and then instituted a more profound reform. This makes sense of many awkward references to the old style of military activity, which was finally replaced by a new administration based on *themata* in the early ninth century. It is a major achievement.

Similarly, Noble situates the 'art talk' at the court of Charlemagne in the context of his major reforms (ecclesiastical, liturgical, administrative) so that the activity of his theological advisers (apparently very few) can be seen in relation to other courtiers with more pressing responsibilities for military or financial matters. But the famous Tironian notes prove beyond doubt that the king took a personal interest in the composition of his *Books*. Why were they not cited by later authorities, such as his son Louis the Pious at the Synod of Paris in 825? Despite Noble's obvious expertise in dealing with a great variety of western sources, this is one part of Charles's inheritance that remains unexplained. His summaries of developments in the Byzantine East also contain some obvious slips: Irene's council met first in 786 not 785 (p. 245); Constantine VI did not die of his blinding (p. 244). Yet he is the only one of these authors who seriously addresses the question of popular devotion to images and the importance of religious art in the education of the uneducated, following Gregory the Great's much quoted dictum that pictures are the Bibles of the illiterate.

The belief that icons could be used to teach was also known in the East, for instance when uneducated people recognised the saints that had appeared to them in dreams (the 'hagiographic topos' identified by Dagron)[3], but it is not stressed in *A history*. Here the priority of relics over images in the early Christian centuries is assumed together with an absence of any veneration of icons, by burning incense or oil in lamps, kissing or bowing before them, until about 680. After this 'tipping point' people began to venerate icons in the same way as relics, and the Trullan canon of 692 encouraged a more excessive and inappropriate type of veneration through the human depiction of Christ rather than his symbolic presence as the Lamb of God. It was this exaggerated form of veneration that the iconoclast bishops and the emperor sought to curb by the instruction in 730 to remove images.

There are several problems encapsulated in this analysis. First, there is considerable evidence that icons were venerated in the same way as relics long before 680. Despite Speck's forensic research in unearthing a number of interpolations in earlier texts made by late eighth-century iconophile writers, the examples of icons (pagan and Christian) dedicated in rituals that clearly imply profound veneration are too numerous to brush aside. Popular belief that images of the Holy Family and the saints could bring cures to the ill, children to infertile women and sanity to the possessed, was

[3] Gilbert Dagron, 'Holy images and likeness', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* xlv (1991), 23–33. See also his *Décrire et peindre: essai sur le portrait iconique,* Paris 2007, 206–11.

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widespread before 680. Second, the discussion ignores the high level of theological debate among Christians of different persuasions and between Christians and Jews, so prevalent in the sixth and seventh centuries. Records of 'question and answer' literature make it clear that uneducated people also followed these debates, and were very concerned to learn what they had to do to be saved. While icons were not always central to the issues, they formed part of the background to a general anxiety, heightened by the obvious military successes of the new revelation of Muhammad, as Averil Cameron has shown.[4] The impact within the Byzantine Empire of Islam's rapid conquest of the Egyptian grain-producing provinces and the spiritual centres of Christianity (between 634 and 641) does not receive adequate treatment here.

Brubaker and Haldon's interpretation challenges many earlier explanations for the onset of iconoclasm. It seeks to minimise the extent of iconoclast destruction and to deny any 'external' influences. Indeed, Brubaker has recently published a more explicit critique of the significance of Byzantine iconoclasm.[5] After examining and putting aside any evidence for Jewish or Islamic influence, they attribute the coincidence of Islamic and Christian iconoclast activity to 'a continuum of shared imagery, ideas and motifs' (p. 106). They conclude (p. 115) that 'there is no contemporary evidence for Islamic influence on Byzantine iconoclasm'. Later writers invented such connections, they claim, to explain the source of evil, and these are neatly laid out in the acts of the Council of 787, to which much detailed analysis is devoted.

Their emphasis on the difference between the Muslim prohibition of figural imagery and 'state' or 'official' Byzantine iconoclasm depends on an analysis of the monuments constructed by Christian communities living under Umayyad rule between 717 and 750. In *A history* Brubaker and Haldon reproduce the material published in *Sources* to demonstrate that the replacement of living figures by trees and flowers, or blank tesserae, was a local response by Christians. It owed nothing to Byzantine example though it may have had 'much in common with Islamic prohibition': 'less official social pressure may have been at work' (p. 105). They cite Theodore Abu Qurrah's sense of obligation to argue the value of Christian icons against Islamic arguments about idolatry (p. 234) and suggest that this local need to deflect criticism 'may provide the most compelling context for the apparent change in taste'.[6]

[4] Averil Cameron, 'The anxiety of images: meanings and material objects', in Angeliki Lymberopoulou (ed.), *Images of the Byzantine world: visions, messages and meanings: studies presented to Leslie Brubaker*, Farnham–Burlington, VT 2011, 47–56.

[5] Leslie Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine iconoclasm*, Bristol 2012.

[6] Brubacker and Haldon, *The sources*, 36.

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Leaving aside the notion that the pivotal role of images was a matter of 'taste', this analysis ignores critical evidence from the Muslim side concerning the Arab conquerors' efforts to define their own religious identity. Twenty-five years ago Oleg Grabar showed how the Arab tribes asserted 'their symbolic appropriation of the land' in buildings that claimed the superiority of Islam combined with a missionary propaganda.[7] In 692, at the Dome of the Rock, Caliph Abd al-Malik employed the full repertoire of marble and golden mosaic non-figural decoration to proclaim that Islam was the final truth revealed by the Abrahamic God, a fulfillment of both Jewish and Christian faiths, with symbols of royalty, votive crowns and jewels. Grabar also emphasised how difficult it was for the Arab tribes to establish their own presence within the extremely affluent ambience of the Near East with its dazzling variety of classical and early Christian monuments. Their admiration and desire to imitate (clear from the use of mosaic, classical columns, capitals and even complete buildings) was mitigated by contempt for the established religions and a rejection of their images.[8] Partly because such images helped to define religious and political positions in a powerful and dangerous way, Grabar argued that Islam singled out the attachment to images as one of 'the most characteristic and hateful aspects of Christianity'.[9]

The intense rivalry between Islam and earlier revelations is surely of great significance in the onset of iconoclasm. By demonstrating their superiority through an art devoid of human representation, Islam challenged both Jews and Christians to justify their own attachment to images. In 721 Caliph Yezid II is reported to have gone further by banning figural images and, despite the rapid repeal of this edict by his successor, many human and animal figures were transformed into trees and flowers. Others were just removed or replaced by blank tesserae (finely illustrated in Bowersock at pp. 100–1). Images thus became a powerful weapon in the rivalry between revelations and were used to define religious and political positions. And unlike images in religious buildings, Muslim and Christian coins made the same contrast and would have been witnessed by all adherents. After *c.* 700 the Arab dinar displayed only Qur'anic inscriptions, while emperors stamped the symbol of the cross as well as their own portraits on Byzantine coins. While Brubaker and Haldon acknowledge the changes of coin images, the more subtle influence of Islamic artistic decoration and the blatant claims made in inscriptions proclaiming the superiority of the Muslim faith are ignored.

Faced by this evident rivalry and aggressive and more self-confident Arab forces, it is clear that the Christian rulers of Byzantium felt increasingly challenged. Despite the failure of the Arab siege of Constantinople in 718,

[7] Oleg Grabar, *The formation of Islamic art*, rev. edn, New Haven 1987, 43–71.
[8] Ibid. 84–7.
[9] Ibid. 86.

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persistent raids threatened to overrun the remaining imperial territory and were only checked after 740. So when Brubaker and Haldon suggest that the most critical problem about Byzantine iconoclasm is what it opposed (p. 787), one clear answer is Islam. The initiation of Byzantine iconoclasm should be understood as the Syrian emperors' reaction to the more clearly defined and permanent presence of the Arabs both in what had been the richest provinces of the empire and on the sea.

In Bowersock's discussion of this issue, he emphasises the tolerant Umayyad rulers of Syria, who permitted the Christians to continue their worship undisturbed, an achievement of late antiquity which has never been revived in the region (p. 122). In order to sustain this image of peaceful coexistence, all previous outbreaks of Christian iconoclasm, for instance in seventh-century Armenia, have to be described as fanatical and short-lived. Yet such records suggest a long tradition of opposition to religious art because it might lead to idolatrous practices. Brubaker and Haldon prefer to interpret the onset of iconoclasm in Constantinople as a reaction against excessive veneration of Christian images, which was a recent development, discount earlier examples of iconophobia and ignore the inherent rivalry between Islam and the older faiths of the region. Yet from the late seventh century onwards, both Arab and Byzantine rulers demonstrate an acute grasp of the propaganda value of images for political and religious purposes. At the very same time as the construction of the Dome of the Rock, Christians were decorating the church of the Nativity at Bethlehem with images of church councils that emphasised the Trinity. As Grabar reminds us, 'the coincidence is certainly not fortuitous'.[10] The distinction of the new Muslim revelation from both Christianity and its Jewish predecessor inevitably revived debate about the need to observe the Old Testament commandments.

A history notes that Patriarch Germanos, whose resignation from the see of Constantinople in 730 marks the onset of official Byzantine iconoclasm, emphasised the validity and binding nature of the Second Commandment against graven images. It was therefore the validity of Christian icons that was in question. The coincidence of victorious Muslim forces proclaiming their correct observance of Mosaic law may not have motivated Leo III. But it seems unlikely that he was not aware of the Arabs' disapproval of Christian figural images, condemned as idols. Once Christian idolatry was identified as the key issue, the removal of icons became an obvious solution.

Noble makes some interesting observations about Carolingian iconoclasm and its relationship to the Byzantine phenomenon, but his analysis is more directed to what happened in the West, where it was Pope Hadrian's

[10] Ibid. 62.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046913001589 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enthusiastic endorsement of Byzantine iconophile practice, as laid down at the Council of Nicaea in 787, that provoked Theodulph of Orléans's strict adherence to the Second Commandment. In this case, what was understood as eastern excess (giving immense power to figural images as well as relics) sparked a rejection very similar to the Muslim experience and created a strong disagreement with the papacy. Since there were very few icons in the West north of the Alps that were venerated in the eastern sense (with incense, bowing or kissing), Theodulph did not need to institute an iconoclast movement of removal and destruction. But Noble shows how the mosaic decoration of the chapel at Germigny incorporated one striking element of the Carolingian understanding of religious imagery, and how later theologians reacted to it.

These books extend and deepen our knowledge of late antique and medieval art in novel ways and each will be enjoyed for its striking content. *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era: a history* also presents an exceptionally detailed and clear account of the highly significant reforms undertaken by the iconoclast Syrian emperors, as well as many other developments of the longer period, 680–850. In *Images, Iconoclasm and the Carolingians* Noble analyses the western responses to the eastern battle over icons, with invaluable translations of and commentary on the texts of Dungal and Jonas produced for Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. Bowersock's much lighter book has the great advantage of entrancing illustrations, which document the survival of pagan mythology long after the imperial assumption of Christianity. Together these books constitute a mine of information about late antique and early medieval art, especially the function of religious art, and about the complex mental world of the Judaic, Christian and Muslim patrons who commissioned it and the craftsmen who created it. They will also be closely studied for the far-reaching administrative and military changes, especially in the East, that secured the survival of Byzantium, and papal support for the justification of icons at Nicaea in 787, which in turn sparked the western debate. But they cannot sustain the more general thesis that Byzantine iconoclasm was an entirely homegrown theology, generated from within the empire. Muslim political and military rivalry, combined with the novel features of Islamic non-figural art, also played a major part after the eruption and conquests of the Arab tribes inspired by the Prophet.

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