

UiT

THE ARCTIC  
UNIVERSITY  
OF NORWAY

Institutt for historie og religionsvitenskap

## Five pictures of Constantine V

*How has Constantine V's iconoclasm influenced successive generations of historians' view of the man and his reign as a whole?*

—  
**Kristian Hansen Schmidt**

*Master thesis in History November 2013*





## **List of contents**

### **1 Introduction. Justifications, explanations, theory, and method: 4**

1.1 Reason for, and formulation of, the problem: 4

1.2 Theory: Why I think history is important and why this question is important: 5

1.3 Method. External and internal comparisons: 10

### **2 A Fairly reliable account of the reign of Constantine V:14**

2.1 Sources for the account: 14

2.2 Overview: 14

2.2.1 The middle Byzantine Empire: 15

2.2.2 Constantine V and his reign: 16

2.3 Revolts and Conspiracies: 17

2.3.1 The revolt of Artabasdos: 17

2.3.2 The plot(s) of 766: 18

2.4 The plague and natural disasters: 19

2.5 Military-strategic situation and developments: 19

2.5.1 The Arabs: 20

2.5.2 The Balkans: 21

2.5.3 Italy: 22

2.5.4 The 'navy: 23'

2.5.5 The Khazars: 23

2.5.6 Technology and military organization: 24

2.5.6.1 The Tagmata and further subdivisions of 'themes: 24'

2.6 Miscellaneous 'constructive' achievements: 25

2.7 Iconoclasm: 26

### **3 First accounts, Nikephoros and Theophanes: 28**

3.1 Introduction: 28

3.2 Nikephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople and his *Short History*: 28

3.3 Theophanes and his Chronicle: 31

3.4 Differences and similarities of Nikephoros and Theophanes: 34

3.5 Our quest for the man inside the iconoclast emperor: 40

#### **4: Enlightenment and prejudice: Edward Gibbon: 42**

4.1.1 Introduction: 42

4.1.2 Gibbon: 42

4.1.3 The context; Gibbon, humanism, enlightenment and Rome: 42

4.1.4 Gibbon and his Roman Empire: 43

4.1.5 Gibbon and the sources: 44

4.1.6 Gibbon and literature, irony as style or obfuscation: 45

4.2 Gibbon's iconoclasm: 46

4.3 Constantine V Copronymos: 48

4.4 Summary: 54

#### **5 Science and rationalism: 56**

5.1 Introduction: 56

5.2 Bury: 56

5.3 Bury, Gibbon and the fall of 'Rome': 59

5.4 Iconoclasm and rationalism: 61

5.5 Constantine, the Conqueror of Armenia: 64

#### **6 Cultural and social struggles, George Ostrogorsky: 66**

6.1 George Ostrogorsky: 66

6.2 The troubled birth of Byzantium: 67

6.3 A balanced account of Constantine and his reign: 70

#### **7 Brubaker and Haldon, revisionism and skepticism: 76**

7.1 New light on the dark ages: 76

7.2 Iconoclasm or iconomachy?: 79

7.3 Culmination during the reign of Constantine V: 81

7.4 Constantine the reasonable zealot: 88

## **8 Discussion and conclusion: 94**

8.1 The continuum between science/rationalism and religion: 94

8.2 The continuum between temperament and personal experiences: 101

8.3 The continuum between genre and theory: 103

8.4 A biographical sketch of Constantine V and his reign: 107

8.5 Conclusion: 111

## **9 Literature: 113**

### **Appendices**

I: The conclusion of Alfred Lombard's biography of Constantine V: 117

II Map of Byzantium ca 565: 118

III Map of Byzantium ca 750: 119

IV Map of Byzantium ca 780: 120

V Map of Byzantium ca 1025: 121

VI Graph of territorial extent of Byzantium 284-1461: 122

# **1: Introduction. Justifications, explanations, theory, and method.**

## **1.1 Reason for, and formulation of, the problem**

I often say that I never have just one reason for doing whatever I do, and I usually apply the same principle to causation in history. I think it quite rare to find a sequence of events where just one cause is followed by just one effect, especially outside the context of an experiment in a laboratory.

Thus I have a lot of reasons for writing this master, but at least one is very personal and has to do with the drive, or the urge, which underlies the more technical and rational reasons for doing most anything. Some ten years ago I was in a kind of semi-employment at the main public library in Århus, the second largest town in Denmark. In the same kind of 'job' as myself was an emigrant from Greece, and our considerable personal differences notwithstanding, we respected each other for our shared passion for historical subjects, not least our common interest in Byzantium. At some point I asked him his opinion of Constantine V, whether he didn't think there were many redeeming circumstances about his reign, as I from my first acquaintance with this emperor had the impression that he wasn't treated entirely fairly in historiography. Though I knew my co-worker to be an orthodox believer, I was so shocked by his reaction that I feel the surprise to this day, though the precise form my question and his answer took, long since have faded from memory.

He got positively angry and refused to even consider the question, instead countering by demanding an explanation why I would waste my time on such a worthless misfoster, being an otherwise intelligent and reasonable person as he had hitherto assumed me to be. Though this exchange remained one incident which wasn't allowed to permanently sour our relation, I have been forever after puzzled, as in my horizon intelligence and reason seemed to encourage, rather than discourage, my interest in an emperor like Constantine V. And ironically enough, the fact that a person who had been dead for more than 1200 years could still evoke such a response from an educated person, only served to further increase my curiosity. Indeed it is this curiosity which moves me to formulate this question:

## **How has Constantine V's iconoclasm influenced successive generations of historians' view of the man and his reign taken as a whole?**

I own briefly to give the earlier grounds for this my curiosity. Constantine's nickname in history has often been given as *Kopronymos*, and that alone raised my curiosity, if only because different explanations were given in different languages, in English I learned that it meant 'Name of Shit'. The explanations given were that he, sometimes it was made clear that it was in later traditions, defecated in the baptismal font during his baptism.<sup>1</sup> It's somewhat telling that the nickname isn't mentioned in the oldest sources. Anyhow opinions on him varied in the modern histories, but most were critical or largely ignored him, and in the quest for 'forgotten' emperors to elevate and rehabilitate (together with tendencies to tear down 'great' emperors), he was passed over. And that in spite of the fact that he reigned for 34 years, one of the longest effective reigns in one Byzantine emperor's own name, and on the face of it achieved quite a lot. A 'list' of these achievements is to be found in chapter 2 below. What told against him clearly were his religious policies which have gone down in history as iconoclasm. In the following (and most literature on Byzantium) Constantine's fellow heretics are designated *iconoclasts* (image breakers), his orthodox opponents *iconodules* (image worshippers).

### **1.2 Theory: Why I think history is important and why this question is important**

At a very basic level I've always been interested in history simply because I find history interesting and exciting. Sometimes one has to defend ones' interests, at present my defence of the science, or art, of history, is quite pragmatic, and has two levels moving from the personal (particular) to the general.

At the basic level I rationalize my interest in history as a result of how my brain looks for (or constructs) patterns, and reads a narrative into this pattern, with agents, intentions and causal relationships. At the same time this gives me a sense of 'belonging' in the world, by 'explaining' how *I* got here, and what *here* is and where it came from.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a less simple explanation one can consult Appendix 1: The Nicknames of Constantine V (Gero 1977: 169-178).

And in so doing I speculate about the other 'Is' which are around, and went before, me. This is hardly revolutionary, and though I cannot be certain (as I have no way of being absolutely sure), I assume that most other people, to varying degrees, have the same urge towards contextualisation through historicalisation as I do.<sup>2</sup>

This is, however, not a justification of the discipline of history as such, we might imagine ourselves perfectly able to function without any constitutive memory, though personally I prefer to file that kind of fantasy under dystopias, recently (maybe) made possible by diverse technological breakthroughs. But in a world where I would like funding to be granted to the historical faculties at universities, and where I would like history to be taught at schools, I cannot simply fall back on the argument that history is fun and gives me a sense of satisfaction, or even belonging. Other things might do the same, while being more useful. This is where the other 'I's enters the argument and it becomes more general.

Though I *can* imagine a world where any kind of historical study, argument, and even structured interest in the past is forbidden, I can't imagine it to work, the problem of enforcement alone obviously being insurmountable. People will always (at least the available evidence points firmly in that direction) seek to validate their opinions, political as well as personal, by referring to factors which are in some way or another historical. And this is not limited to 'historical' dramas on the television networks (and myriads of other modern networks), but contributes heavily, as reason or content matter, to political decisions being made that influence the lives of billions. While it is abundantly clear that the mere existence of qualified history writing isn't any perfect antidote against the most horrendous of erroneous claims made in the name of history, it seems imperative that some professionals are given the means to do the handiwork of history in a qualified manner, and that some kind of control mechanisms exist to judge the result. Thus in this respect I applaud the application of the scientific approach to the art of history, though I, as stated in the beginning, do not think historical research reduceable to what happens in a laboratory. We can't establish simple rules to predict the exact future outcome of a given policy, and we can't decide beyond doubt and argument

---

<sup>2 2</sup> Indeed I believe myself to be going no further than Kant in this, though, if pressed hard enough, I have to declare myself a solipsist. I'm just very pragmatic about it.



what is true or false, but we *can* discern between likely and unlikely, look for inconsistencies in theories of history and claims, establish a modicum of correct and incorrect. We can also take pride in our work and try to establish solid and convincing narratives, taking comfort in the knowledge that our fellow historians are eager to point out any errors we might make during the attempt.

Having thus (I hope) established some kind of ‘objective’ justification for the study of history in general, I owe an attempt at explaining (apart from my personal preferences) what specific reasons there might be for studying Constantine V and his iconoclasm. First I need to declare that the lack of an obvious reason doesn’t mean that there can be no reason, one is not always aware what knock-on effects one particular study later might confer on another. But in this particular case it is obvious that iconoclasm, or at least prohibition against portraiture of God, has not outlasted its role in at least one culture with which we are in intimate, if sometimes strained, intercourse.<sup>3</sup> And indeed our own protestant culture has had its occasional iconoclast times, in *my* reformed Lutheran context in a straight line back, so even the fact that Byzantium had little direct influence on the development of Danish modes of worship today (as opposed to my former co employee in Århus), doesn’t in itself rule out that the phenomenon of iconoclasm (or religious phenomena in general) can be of some interest for my understanding the world I live in. One question that immediately presents itself is whether iconoclasm as concept term has a clear meaning, or if it is several different phenomena we subsume under the same epithet or in the same fuzzy category? Therefore it might be relevant to compare different instances of iconoclasm, and that means studying also that branch of iconoclasm of which I have the least knowledge and the sparsest of sources, as it is an iconoclasm which is today long dead. Not being able to read the primary sources on iconoclasm, I am furthermore limited to later translations and secondary literature, and I know from these readings that historians are far from agreeing on exactly what Byzantine iconoclasm was. All this inevitably draws my attention in the direction of historiography, and give additional reasons, apart from my initially

---

<sup>3</sup> I might as well admit that I use the term ‘culture’ in a somewhat loose manner. At least I believe I’m not alone in this. The ‘culture’ referred to here is of course Islam, though Judaism of course came first and thus constitutes common roots.

mentioned personal one, to look into other peoples conception of Constantine as iconoclast and human.

Now I *am* interested in religion, but not overly much in theology, so I don't feel tempted, nor qualified, to approach the problem from the inside. Also tackling the phenomenon in its entirety seems impossible, and therefore I find that approaching the iconoclasm of Constantine is a reasonable strategy. And I find the form in which I have formulated the problem above to carry with it some advantages, besides it being a question which has pressed on my mind for a long time. For it is the effect it has had on historians, as they approached it from inside and/or without, that demands my attention, as I am not interested in whether iconoclasm in itself is true or false. One very important contributing reason for this interest in historians' interpretations is that I am aware of the fact that the overwhelming majority of people who have lived up till now, and indeed probably still a majority of people alive, have been or are religious. At least that is my firm conviction, though it *can* be postulated that many were just pretending. It is very likely that sceptics indeed have existed in all ages, questioning if not religion itself at least the form it was handed down to them, but it is hard to recognize them by sight. Using the 'follow the money' approach (who gained by it?) and identifying the priesthoods as rationalist charlatans who made it all up, is in my eyes not a fruitful strategy. However it cannot *a priori* be ruled out that Constantine *was* irreligious, and as we shall see that has, under different forms, been speculated.

At this point it is important that I underline that **this is not a dissertation about iconoclasm**, in fact it is sometimes difficult enough for myself to remember in the process of writing and researching. I am trying to establish how conceptions about the 1<sup>st</sup> Byzantine iconoclasm have changed over time, what place it took in history's judgments of rulers, reigns and epochs. In this I am using the most notorious (as least such it seems) of the iconoclast emperors as a prism, but I do it by proxy looking at how historians have demonstrably done it. In choosing this approach an important interrelated question becomes how historians, also on the background of their own religion or irreligion, handle the intricate problem how the relationship between the 'holy' and the secular played itself out, and indeed plays itself out, in the human mind. Those who consider all

religion to be superstition, are likely to encounter the largest problems in solving that particular question. That is not my main ambition here, I merely wish to keep it in mind.

But is not enough to investigate whether, and to what extent, Constantine was either irreligious or superstitious, a calculating atheist or a misguided heretic. Anyway the term heretic only implies that ‘mainstream’ Christianity didn’t approve of the form that brand of Christianity took. Indeed I find it worth considering whether he might have been a pietist, a kind of ‘holier than thou’, and that iconoclasm was intended, not as a religious reform, but as an attempt to save the church from dangerous new practices, which latter phrase is just another way of saying heresy.

In one sense this is a dissertation on bias, both religious and atheist. Bias is not only religious, but also the opposite, bias against religion. On another level, though not qualitatively different from that bias, is the bias which is connected to what we call the discursive level. This is also the bias which can be seen as a blind spot, which rather than ‘actively’ forcing a point of view on the details of a subject matter, works more subtly in shaping the concept in setting a limit for which questions can be asked.

All the above condenses my own interpretation of what postmodernism and cultural turn (to use two modern categories which might rather be catchwords), means for the study of history. I believe it, in its more radical aspects, to be not very divergent from this declaration of Brubaker and Haldon’s:

Representation is always central to questions of historiography: it includes how we define and locate ourselves within (or outside of), the meta narratives that our society has constructed about the past. But it is also crucial for history, because people in the past were, like us, caught in the perpetual give and take of reproduction and reinforcement of their immediate environment (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 783).

And this dissertation *is* very much about representation, from the icons to modern representations of these representations, during so many stages of representation that I shall not attempt to enumerate them all. *I* (re)present five ‘pictures’ of (my interpretation) of five historians’ (or at least 5 chapters) interpretations of Constantine, all the while trying to remember that we are, like they were, caught in the same give and take.

### 1.3 Method. External and internal comparisons

To get down to business and reflect a little on what this means in practice for this dissertation, I can't just sum up what a historian thinks about iconoclasm (in positive and negative terms), and then compare it with their general assessment of Constantine. Instead I will have to make some kind of balanced account, where I try to 'weigh' all their opinions about the reign of Constantine, and place this reign in the context of the history of Byzantium itself. I must also, in as far as it is possible, contextualise the place, if any, they assign to Byzantium within history as a whole.

The space allotted to me is limited, and I prefer to choose just a few general histories for my analysis, thereby hoping to get at least to some depths in all of these. They will be more fully introduced in their relevant chapters, here they are just briefly introduced. First are the (near) contemporary narrative sources, which of necessity form the basis for all the later histories, and as such I would have to treat them anyway. It is the Patriarch Nikephoros *Short History* (Nikephoros 1990) probably written in the 780's, and *The chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Theophanes 1997) ca 815, to what extent they qualify as 'general' histories will be discussed in chapter 3. The iconophile later histories are mostly dependent embroiderings on these two, and following this track would need (another) whole investigation. The tradition I choose to follow is mostly the modern western, and I jump straight to the classic, Edward Gibbons *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Gibbon 1909-12), first published 1776-1788, which makes up chapter 4. Then I make a hundred years jump to J.B. Bury's *History of the later roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene* (Bury 1889), the discussion of which makes up chapter 5. In chapter 6 I make my only detour (apart from the primary sources) from English scholarly tradition, with the Russian born (and thereby of orthodox background and a more direct descendant of the Byzantines), George Ostrogorsky, who in German in 1940 published the first edition of *History of the Byzantine State* (Ostrogorsky 1968). All these can be claimed to be standard works. Topping it all is a joint effort of two modern Byzantinists, Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon's *Byzantium in the iconoclast era* (Brubaker and Haldon 2011). Whether *that* one will stand the test of time remains to be seen, and it is anyway not a history of the entire byzantine period (the precise length of which is difficult enough to agree on), but the sudden appearance of that

was (yet another) reason contributing to the choice of subject for this dissertation. It receives the fullest treatment of any of my histories, not because I assume that the newest must be the best, but because it does attempt to treat the period in greater detail, and inevitably introduces many questions which cannot be said to be fully resolved. Yet by choosing this vertical, rather than horizontal approach, this in a way also becomes a *very* brief history on history (ad the history of Byzantium itself).

It is useless wasting space on justifying my choice further here. I hope the rest of the dissertation will go some way to prove it sensible. I have to mention, though, that there is one (and seemingly the only) biography written on Constantine V, A Lombard's *Constantine* (Lombard 1902). Unfortunately I don't speak French, and nobody has found it worth the trouble to translate it into any language I can read. As it is sometimes mentioned in the notes of later works, it seem not to be because it has no qualities at all as history, rather it seem to be a pointer to the fact that Constantine's bad name has resulted in less than justified interest in him and his long reign. This absence of Lombard is regrettable, the more so because I have no historian with a Catholic background, and though I have found no confirmation, chances are that Lombard's background is catholic.<sup>4</sup>

However I can use it as prompter to reflect a little on historical biographies and the concept of the great man in history. Historical biographies are immensely popular in mainstream society, if not amongst historians, but I could have attempted one on Constantine (and Lombard's is actually only 150 pages long). A recent biography on one of Constantine's predecessors, Heraclius, has this to say about great men: "Modern historians might well prefer to avoid bestowing an epithet on a sovereign who failed to receive it in antiquity or during the Middle Ages, given that that very category is in disfavor today (Kaegi 2003: 12). I have two partial defences for the historical biography. First there is the absence (in many periods) of proper sources for writing a history of the common man, and even when it is possible, balance is added by describing how the other end of the spectrum functioned, and a very interesting question is always how 'one' man,

---

<sup>4</sup> Treadgold has mentioned Lombard in a survey of secondary literature he has used: "[It] remains of some use but goes too far in correcting the sources' bias against Constantine" (Treadgold 1997: 907). I've had one of my French friends translate the conclusion of Lombard's biography, which I append as appendix I. As can be seen Lombard was very impressed with Constantine, and it is to be regretted that I can't ascertain how he got there.

the general example or one privileged individual in particular, could influence the flow of history. Or maybe rather precisely what part he could play in it, which particular possibilities and restraints were operative. Even just trying to establish that, in general or at a certain period, is likely to tell us more by conferring better understanding the wider context. Another reason is that we really can't avoid assigning parts to all the actors of history. As soon as an historian introduces a name into the narrative, he is bound to take on characteristics according to the part he plays, and the way of presentation (whether conscious or not on the part of the historian), is bound to influence the mental picture which is formed. That is pretty much what I mean when I use the word prism about Constantine and his reign, and I shouldn't shrink from, as a part of my conclusions, to give my personal assessment of Constantine.

I shall consider each of these histories as somewhat self-contained units, as most of my analysis will look for also inconsistencies in the single work, and not during different works of one author over time. However, in establishing the wider context, I will when I deem it appropriate draw in other works (of any kind) that I think will help the investigation on its way. I don't adhere to any preconceived schema for added comparability between the histories. That might seem like a lack of standardization, but I think the differences in structure in the histories warrants a freer approach. In the conclusion I intend to integrate them all in a final more thematic discussion.

Names of persons and localities appear in several different spellings in both primary and secondary sources. I have preserved the spelling of each when I cite or reference my different authors, and otherwise chosen one form as standard in my own text. I hope and believe this will not cause confusion. Throughout the dissertation, as above, I often refer to Constantine V simply as Constantine.

To sum up, my main question is: How has Constantine V's iconoclasm influenced successive generations of historians' view of the man and his reign as a whole?

A secondary question is: How do religious beliefs (own and observed) influence historians' narratives in particular, and the common man's 'meta narratives' in general?

I will try to answer these questions by looking at, and eventually comparing, 5 different 'cases' from the history of byzantine history. It should be remarked that the second question will not as much be answered (I'm not that ambitious or vain) as asked repeatedly. Rather, tentative answers might be used as basis for more specific questions.

## **2: A Fairly Reliable Account of the Reign of Constantine V**

### **2.1 Sources for the account**

Lack of extensive contemporary sources makes it difficult to claim very much with absolute certainty about this reign, and on occasion it will be necessary to make clear that the reliability of this account can be questioned. It relies heavily upon Haldon and Brubaker (2011), and as this work in itself constitutes an important part of the later discussion, some of these uncertainties will be treated in larger depths later. Suffice it to say here that this up to date account in some ways breaks quite radically with former historiography, and that I will make it clear *when* it does. Apart from that, many of these events will be referred to, and elaborated on, when the discussion of my different historians warrants it.

All later histories rely heavily on Nikephoros and Theophanes (and some other narrative sources of different origin and language which, on rare occasions, throw some light on specific Byzantine affairs). The relative importance of the written narratives stems not from them being particularly good, extensive, reliable or even contemporary, but derives from the scarcity of other written sources (Brubaker and Haldon 2003: 165). For details of other sources I refer the reader to that work, but will mention that sigilliography is an important, and problematic, source for detailed studies on the period (Brubaker and Haldon 2003: 129f).

### **2.2 Overview**

This aims to give the context, not only of Constantine's reign and iconoclasm, but also the iconoclast era's place in Byzantine history, and the empire's place in the world. It is not exhaustive, indeed some basic knowledge of the Byzantine Empire will be assumed on my part, as this is not a suicidal attempt to make a general history in 10 pages. A decent and fairly recent general history of Byzantium is Warren Treadgold's *A History of the Byzantine State* (Treadgold 1997). However it shall be noted that he sometimes advocates what I throughout the dissertation will call 'the traditional view'; apart from that its strengths and weaknesses are his somewhat naïve relationship to the written sources, which he on occasion merely paraphrases, he appears to use common sense to



decide what is not to be trusted. At least it presents a clear and engaged narrative with equally clear opinions on the main topics.

### **2.2.1 The middle Byzantine Empire.**

The Byzantine Empire was in 741 still a 'true' empire, if widespread possessions are taken as an indicator. The one great kernel of land mass was made up of Asia Minor, apart from that most of the major Mediterranean islands, including the Balearic, were under some form of imperial control. Also mostly linked to the centre by the sea were coastal areas around the littoral of the Balkans, together with at least some of the hinterland of Constantinople itself. Venice, Ravenna, Rome, parts of southern Italy, and Cherson (on the Crimea) were farther flung possessions. It was most decidedly an absolute monarchy, though one can always argue how 'absolute' control was possible, society was heavily centralized on Constantinople and the imperial administration, and active emperors could exert a considerable, though not unlimited, amount of control.

Chronologically it can be seen either to be the beginning of the middle empire, or the very last epoch in the late Roman. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century Justinian I's attempt at reconquest added Italy, North Africa and Southern Spain to what then was the eastern Roman Empire, the western part having disintegrated in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Nearly intermittent warfare against the Sassanid Empire (Persian), and Avars and Slavs in the Balkans from the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, to ca 628 brought a crisis in the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, seeing the loss of most of the Balkans and Armenia, Southern Spain, Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. After a seemingly miraculous recovery of (only) the eastern provinces under Heraclius (610-641), these were again lost to the newly formed Arab caliphate by the middle of the century, followed by Armenia and around the end of the century Cilicia and North Africa (Carthage). Though there was no direct threat to the Empire's capital from the Balkans after the failed siege by Persians and Avars in 626, Byzantine control of the inland regions of the Balkans was purely nominal. Though some Slav tribes there on occasion recognized Byzantine suzerainty, actual control was only a reality if a field army was present.

Constantinople was first besieged by the Arabs for several years in the 670's, and in 717/8, the Byzantine victories were on both occasions morally important but still

strictly defensive, attributable at least as much to the extraordinarily strong fortifications of Constantinople as to military skill or strength. Still civic chaos, lack of provisions and lack of moral within the walls would undoubtedly have spelled disaster. Anyhow a period with relative territorial stability set in, even if the remaining parts of the empire were in no way secure from raiding by its numerous enemies.

Despite later losses of the Western islands, followed by Crete and during the course of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Sicily, the Empire slowly recovered, reformed and finally reconquered all of the Balkans and Armenia during the century after ca 920. It also most notably brought Kievan Russia into the orbit of Christian Europe. This is generally, and in my opinion rightly, considered the golden age of Byzantium. What fascinates many historians is that a more than millennium old empire refused to follow the common schema and just collapse totally, but instead made this remarkable recovery, enabling it (by barely hanging on till the renaissance, in the process playing a large part in the history of much of modern Europe.

### **2.2.2 Constantine V and his reign**

A considerable amount of continuity presents itself between his father, Leo III and Constantine V, on the very basic level as a result of imperial propaganda. It only makes the contrast sharper that the previous seven changes of Emperor had been by usurpation. Leo seized power in the politically chaotic situation immediately before the Arab Siege in 717, and (as stated together with the walls) deservedly got a lot of credit to his name on that account. Enough indeed that he could cling to power while at the same time follow through unpopular policies, whether these were (as traditionally supposed) religious, or merely designed to extract the largest possible amount of resources in the most efficient way. We are basically talking effective and heavy taxation, rarely the obvious bid for popularity. Constantine was designated heir in 720 and, undoubtedly to cement the new dynasty, involved in his fathers' policies, visibly on coins, but also sharing credit for the *Ekloge*, "a revised and much abridged version of the Justinianic codification" (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 78) now believed to have been promulgated at the very eve of his reign in 741. Also he shared the honour with Leo for a military victory against raiding Arabs at Akroinon in 740, mentioned below in 2.5.1.

Constantine himself reigned from 741 to 775 and is primarily remembered for his iconoclasm. This issue has to a large extent been the defining factor not only for his reign, but also his father's and a whole epoch in Byzantine history, though it has increasingly become questioned whether this later focus on this religious issue in any way accurately reflects its real and perceived importance at the time.<sup>5</sup> The present rendering of the reign will not be strictly chronological but mostly topical.

### **2.3. Revolts and conspiracies**

During his reign Constantine on several occasions faced serious revolts and rebellions, and these have usually been seen in the context of the controversy over holy images. However it is worth noting that some emperors with shorter reigns faced more (recorded) rebellions, and that none of those against Constantine were ultimately successful.

#### **2.3.1 The revolt of Artabasdos<sup>6</sup>**

At the beginning of his reign Constantine was faced with a serious revolt from his brother in law Artabasdos, whom his father Leo III, for his assistance in gaining the throne, had awarded the command of the most important military division of the Empire. The revolt quickly developed into a full-fledged civil war with most of the military divisions of the empire involved, though the extent of popular support for the two factions (if any there was) is difficult to gauge.

On the 18 June 741, en route to the eastern frontier of the empire to launch an attack against the Arabs, Constantine was assaulted by the troops under Artabasdos' command. Outnumbered, Constantine fled but soon found support with other divisions, and in the course of the civil war he consistently defeated the opposing forces, which were on occasion led by Artabasdos himself but more often by his son Niketas. By autumn 742 Constantine was blockading and besieging Constantinople, the siege ending only 2 November 743. Even then, Artabasdos fled the city and was bottled up in a fort in

---

<sup>5</sup> An example of the increasing awareness of this is this quote from a rather recent compilation on Byzantine History: "The religious policy of the period [700-850] has deliberately been left until last, to prevent it eclipsing all other aspects, as so often happens." (Auzépy 2008). In chapter 7 this view will be thoroughly treated.

<sup>6</sup> There is much confusion on both the exact time of the start of the rebellion and how long it lasted, a confusion which stems from the sources (Brubaker and Haldon 2011:157, note9).

Anatolia, but the civil war was to all intent and purpose over (Treadgold 1997: 356-58); (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 156-60).

It seems pretty clear that other conspiracies were brewing early in the reign, or at least that Constantine suspected that they were, as amongst others one of Constantine's supporters against Artabasdos was executed around the same time as the punishment towards Artabasdos and his followers were meted out, though the latter met with less than capital punishment and was blinded (Brubaker and Haldon: 2011: 160).<sup>7</sup>

It is speculated that at least the early problems of Constantine were connected to some physical disability which in the eyes of some supposedly made him unfit for rule, leprosy or epilepsy being two suggestions, but only one western source makes a specific reference (to leprosy), while the iconophile sources merely hint at this (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 157).<sup>8</sup>

I for one have difficulties swallowing that it would not have been triumphantly referred to by every iconophile source if indeed such an ailment (especially leprosy) had afflicted Constantine. I find the question worth mentioning because it bears on the background of Constantine and would certainly have been a factor in his psychic make up. And whereas natural disasters seen as divine punishment or warnings (as we shall see) have often been speculated as triggers, a personal condition might equally qualify in that direction, although probably at a more 'basic' level..

### **2.3.2 The plot(s) around 766**

Though the precise extent and character of the conspiracy, or conspiracies around 766 is difficult to gauge, it is clear that Constantine faced opposition from lay officials as well as ecclesiasticals, apparently including the patriarch Constantine II who was eventually executed (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 175 and 237-239). Unfortunately here Brubaker

---

<sup>7</sup> In Roman times the usual punishment for state-crimes was death, but in Christian times different kinds of bodily mutilations (which conceivably disqualified the victim from ruling) were often inflicted, usually seen as a result of Christian ethics and ban on the taking of lives.

<sup>8</sup> It bothers me somewhat that Brubake and Haldon doesn't specify which western source, or indeed where in the iconophile sources these hints are to be found. Their reference is to Speck, where the relevant section (which presumes epilepsy or "jede anderen krankheit" which might be more successfully 'hidden' than leprocy), is thus introduced: "Es soll hier ausdrücklich gesagt sein, daß das Folgende fast mehr den Charakter eines historisierenden Romans als einer Hypothese hat, [...] Daß überhaupt die Lösung der Frage nur mit hilfe der Hypothese möglich ist, bedarf bei der Quellenlage keines bewaises" (Speck 1981: 261).

and Haldon are so busy determining the plot's significance in a wider context, that the developments of the conspiracy itself become even hazier than necessary, amongst other a previous mention of the patriarch's implication have entirely avoided detection by me. Treadgold on the other hand clearly connects the plots to iconophile sympathies and at least clearly states that 2 out of 19 high officials were executed, the others severely punished. Following Theophanes he doesn't connect the execution of the patriarch with the plot proper (Treadgold 1997: 364f). While this on the other hand is probably too simple a rendering, what matters is that Constantine again was threatened by conspirators, uncovered them, thereby successfully reacting to a threat against his throne and thereby dynastic succession and stability, without indiscriminate slaughtering. He afterwards (and indeed on many occasions during the whole of his reign) found his position secure enough to repeat campaigning against the Bulgarians. In general it was often a dilemma for emperors whether to entrust a powerful army, or the capital, to some loyal associate.

#### **2.4. The plague and natural disasters**

At the time of Constantine's coronation Constantinople was still affected by the damages inflicted by the great earthquake of 740, and it seem that much early effort was spent rebuilding destroyed or damaged buildings (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 161).

It should be added that the extent of the empire, and much of it coincident with zones of regular seismic activity, assured that earthquakes and volcanic eruptions were, if not everyday occurrences, quite common. When other disasters like droughts and floods (and less natural) invasions again over a vast area is taken into account, few years will have passed without any mishap to seize upon, if one was so inclined. The great disaster of the reign must however be the plague, which ravaged the mediterranean world from 745, reaching Constantinople 747 (Treadgold 1997: 360).<sup>9</sup>

#### **2.5 Military-strategic situation and developments**

---

<sup>9</sup> Recurrent plague had struck with intervals since the reign of Justinian, but after this outbreak it took until the great epidemics of the middle 14<sup>th</sup> century before the plague resurged, though there (to the best of my knowledge) isn't agreement as to whether it was the same plagu(s) on both (or even during) these periods.

Byzantium was, as mentioned above, at this time an empire with widely scattered possessions and military obligations as far as the Western mediterranean basin, even including Mallorca as late as “the first third of the eighth century” (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: note 90). These scattered possessions can be seen as something of a mixed blessing, and to state that Byzantium was more or less permanently involved in a two front war would be somewhat simplistic, as different kinds of threats could (and did) arise at many different faraway places at the same time. None the less the most important areas for the empire were at this time (as through most of its history) Anatolia and the Balkans, and much fighting occurred on both fronts.

### **2.5.1 The Arabs**

Arguably the most dangerous of the two fronts was the Caliphate, with which Byzantium in 741 had been practically permanently at war for more than a century, indeed the period since the Arabs’ second attempt at taking Constantinople in 717-18 had seen yearly raids into Anatolia, raids that continued at least until 744, when ongoing civil war in the Umayyad Caliphate finally became too much of a distraction for the new Abbassid dynasty to launch centrally directed raids against Byzantium. (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 166).

Undoubtedly the fall of the Umayyads (apart from a lingering presence in Spain), the civil war which preceded it followed by the efforts needed to consolidate power after the ‘official’ change of dynasty in 750, and the moving of the capital of the caliphate to Baghdad was helping relieve pressure on the eastern frontier. However Constantine had had his own civil war and anyway Baghdad was apparently not made capital until 762,<sup>10</sup> though it is far from me to postulate that Byzantine pressure induced the Abbassids to shift their center of attention eastwards.

---

<sup>10</sup> It only recently became clear to me what the capital of the caliphate was between 750 (where most histories on Byzantium seem to imply Baghdad became capital, and 762 when it initially got that status. I’ve found a notice that “logistical considerations were making it increasingly difficult for the Abassids to wage war on Byzantium from their new capital under construction at Baghdad” (Kaegi 2008: 387). I first got puzzled when I wanted to check with a historical map, and found 762 on Baghdad (Mytting 2000: 227 map 4). It turns out that Kufa near Baghdad served as temporary capital. I can’t resist mentioning that this challenging of assumptions sparked by graphical temporal-spatial representations, lends weight to some of the points discussed in my master dissertation in Science of Documentation (Schmidt 2008)

Up to the reign of Constantine the Byzantines had been very much on the defensive, though one recent example of successful countering of at least one large detachment of an extensive raid was the victory at Akroinon in 740, where Constantine, as well as his father Leo III, was present (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 76). If this had been planned as a sustained counteroffensive against the Caliphate, then it was cut short by the revolt of Artabasdos, though even under the Byzantine civil war small scale attacks in the border region secured some minor successes for the Byzantine arms (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 166f)<sup>11</sup>.

Warfare continued on this front for most of the reign, though it is unlikely that the aim was ever the destruction of the Caliphate. Rather it seems that the objective was the creation of a border zone in the form of a buffer, as there was extensive transplantation of the (still largely Christian) population on and directly past the border. Thus population was transferred from Northern Syria following successful attacks on Germanikea 745/6, and in 750-1 and 754-5 from Melitene and Theodosiopolis hinterlands, populations which were resettled in Thrace. Some transfers of population also occurred in the other direction (i.e from Europe to Asia), though it is unclear which areas of Anatolia benefited from this influx of population. The result was a stabilization of the border, which remained fairly static for another 150 years. Both during the reign and after, both sides enjoyed victories and raiding was endemic. Diplomacy never entirely ceased to take place between the two sides, sometimes resulting in short lived peace or truces, often concluded with exchange of prisoners (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 166f)

The renewed military effort also took place at sea with several successful actions being fought by the Byzantine fleets against the Arabs (Auzépy 2008: 255f).

## **2.5.2 The Balkans**

---

<sup>11</sup> This whole part is somewhat suspect, as I during the writing of this part came across a quite serious chronological error in the narrative rendering of the campaign in Brubaker and Haldon. Basically what might have been a typo making 751 to 741 has apparently been used as the foundation for the narrative, so that the context strongly supports the (wrong) date of 741. previously mentioned confusion about the exact chronology of the usurpation of Artabasdos only makes matters worse. Brubaker and Haldon state that Constantine would have followed up his “victory at Melitene in late 741” (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 167). The success to be followed up upon might be the battle of Akroinon, as no sources say anything about Melitene for 741, or indeed until 751.

For the preceding 100 years effective imperial control had been restricted to these disconnected though often quite important strategic strongholds and centers of population, the second largest city of the Empire, Thessaloniki, being the prime example. The largely Slavonic inland areas rarely posed more than strictly local threats as the Slavs seldom united in larger organized groups, but from 680 the Turkic Bulgarians established a very different state on former (or rather theoretical) imperial territory south of the Danube. It was against this state that the supreme military effort of the reign was made.

For long periods the relations between the Bulgars and Byzantium remained mostly peaceful and on occasion friendly, but the transportation of population to the areas south of the Bulgar Khanate, together with construction of a string of fortresses ostensibly provoked the Bulgars to demand tribute which was refused, and hostility between the two powers erupted though not necessarily as the result of a conscious wish on Constantine's part to initiate prolonged hostilities, but it was what resulted. From 759 to 775 no less than 9 imperial expeditions were launched against Bulgaria, many of them successful (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 164f).

### **2.5.3 Italy**

Only a short time elapsed between Justinian's reconquest and the loss to the Lombards of most of Italy, though Byzantium clung to some (apart from 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century steadily dwindling) coastal areas and cities until eventually 1071. The first low point was reached during our period, when the last Byzantine possessions in Northern Italy (Ravenna) and Rome were lost to the Lombards. Eventually this induced the popes to seek Frankish help against the Lombards, and the pope was afterwards granted the former imperial territories which became the Papal State. Venice continued to acknowledge imperial authority and was in the following centuries sometimes an important support for the Empire in the Adriatic, though it was practically independent and eventually asserted itself very strongly against its former master in 1203/4. The alliance between the Franks (and their Carolingian dynasty), was of course an important prerequisite for the coronation of Charlemagne in 800 and the birth of a Western Roman Empire.



#### **2.5.4 The ‘navy’**

Little is written, and maybe even less known, of the history of the Byzantine navy, and in all probability the term is quite anachronistic for the collection of ships which on occasion made up naval armaments for different purposes. We can gauge that localized navies did exist: “The Kibbyrrhaitoi [permanent naval division based on southern Anatolia] destroyed an Arab fleet off Cyprus in 748, and the organisation of a Sicilian fleet during the 750s put paid to half a century of incessant Arab raiding on Sicily” (Ausupy 2008: 255f).

We do know that specialized warships, a kind of galley called dromon, existed, but even today historians, landlubbers as most of us are, can be vague on naval terminology, and even *if* specialized terms are used in an original source, a suspicion that it might be wrongly applied must linger. Apart from the references to naval activity in general, we do have examples during Constantine’s reign of amphibious operations, where several of the expeditions against Bulgaria employed forces, even cavalry, being sent in the rear of the enemy by ships. Whether these were specially built warships, or improvised merchantmen, we have no way of knowing.

Apart from inferring Constantine to be thus alive to the strategic possibilities of dominating the sea (which usually was possible at least north of the Dardanelles), the mere shape of the empire forces us to assume continued widespread naval activity, as only this could tie the dispersed parts of the Empire together. The whole question might constitute one of our most serious blanks about Byzantium at large. Therefore it might be considered ironic that the most famous of all Byzantine weapons, the greek fire described below in 2.5.6, is mostly associated with naval encounters.

It might be worth noting that the *relative* strength of the Byzantine navies and its opponents seems to have tipped in favour of the latter in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, which might imply that the navy was partly neglected in those times, revival notwithstanding.

#### **2.5.5 The Khazars**

As most other states Byzantium associated, for shorter or longer periods, with some of its neighbours. The one stable long term ‘alliance’ worth mentioning is with the Khazar khanate, a Turkish (initially nomadic and undoubtedly at this time heathen) people who

settled north of the Black sea and enjoyed friendly relations with the empire after the Armenian campaigns of Heraclius. Indeed in 733 Constantine was married to the daughter of the Khan (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 76). The stability of the relations was undoubtedly partly a result of the fact that, apart from Cherson, the two nations shared no common (effective) border. It is noteworthy that another (later) long term (mostly) friend of Byzantium, Kievan Russia, to some extent occupied the same general geographical position as the Khazars formerly did.

### **2.5.6 Technology and military organisation**

The Byzantines had an old military tradition at least by stages going back to the legions of Rome, and the army was potentially well equipped with siege engines, doctrine, and supporting units, and since the first Punic war some kind of naval armaments.

Of course tradition and equipment sometimes encumbers more than the specialized benefits really justify, but rightly employed they should confer an edge to the abler of commanders. At sea the Greek Fire is famous, suffice it here to say that it was a liquid sprouted at the enemy through a specially constructed apparatus, and burned even when in contact with water. It is first mentioned in connection with the Arab sieges of Constantinople, and could indeed also be employed defensively in siege warfare. Overall the sophistication of the weapon and its supporting equipment made it too unwieldy to be a really decisive ‘wunder waffe’.<sup>12</sup>

#### **2.5.6.1 The tagmata and further subdivisions of the ‘themes’**

A military ‘reform’ of great importance was the formation of the ‘tagmata’, which was formed by dividing up the overly large Opsician military division which had supported Artabasdos (and several usurpers in the previous 100 years) and using the manpower thus freed to reform old units of, at the present mostly ceremonial functions, into a new elite central army. We don’t know the exact date of their formation, but they are first mentioned by Theophanes for the year 766, around which, in connection with the

---

<sup>12</sup> I’m happy to refer anybody interested in Greek fire to a refreshingly practical and down to business article describing an actual experiment including the making of the compound, and reconstruction of one contraption used to shower the enemy with it, in: (Haldon 2006: 290-325).

extensive conspiracies, other parts of military divisions/themes were further broken up (Treadgold 1995: 28f).

The importance of the formation of the tagmata was twofold. On the one hand the military forces in the vicinity were subdivided under more commanders, making it more difficult to plot against the central government. This move might (maybe even should?) have been obvious to earlier emperors, and in all probability benefited not only Constantine but also later Emperors, and this is generally accepted as the real motive of Constantine's. On the other hand it meant that a new standing army of elite forces was readily available, either operating by itself or forming the core of a larger military force otherwise consisting of what had by then become (if not local militias) provincial forces, though the one point everybody agrees on is that these latter were the successors of the field armies of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. These latter are what was referred throughout above to as 'divisions', and are generally known as themes. Their exact nature at this time is very disputed, I shall refer to that discussion in 6.2 below, at least outlining the problems.

## **2.6 Miscellaneous 'constructive' achievements**

For a ruler largely remembered as a destroyer it can be relevant to include a short notice on constructive measures attributable to the times. We know that Constantine restored the aqueduct of Valens destroyed during the Avar siege of 626, and when the reports of the magnitude of the project is described we understand better why it wasn't done before. Ecclesiastical structures and less specified rebuilding after the earthquake of 740 is also known, and fortress construction is mentioned in connection with especially the Balkans. Finally miniscule writing was introduced at this time, and though no special reason is supporting any idea that it stemmed from the imperial administration, it is clear that it eagerly seized on this important new tool for efficient record keeping and everything else to do with easy writing. It is worth mentioning that several national histories have staked their claim to the invention of miniscule, which was indeed of immense importance for the history of writing.

As mentioned Constantine regularly, and with varying degrees of compulsion, transferred large groups of people from one part of his empire, or from territories outside of it, to depopulated areas. While he was neither the first, nor the last to do so, it must be

specifically mentioned as a constructive demographic achievement helping the more severely stricken parts, however unpleasant it must have been for many of those involved.

It might be strange that I mention that Constantine crowned as Augusta (Empress) his third wife, Eudociae in 768, with whom he already had two sons (Theophanes 1997: 212, 444). But indeed that it seemed no big deal is somewhat remarkable, which I will return to later.

## **2.7 Iconoclasm**

I can make no attempt of describing the theological nuances involved in the iconoclast struggle, only a general chronological outline. (Imperial) iconoclasm is first attested in the sources for 726, and nobody disagrees that the culmination was around, and the decades after, the council of Heireia in 754. On the face of it the iconoclasts took seriously the prohibition against image worship as it is put forth in the Old Testament. A whole range of (seemingly anti-Christian) measures have been linked to this basic question about pictorial representation, often constituting a whole package.

The first iconoclasm ended with the 7<sup>th</sup> ecumenical council in 787, but iconoclasm was reinstated as imperial policy in the period 815-43. This second iconoclasm is generally accepted to be mostly derivative of the first, and only interests us here in as far as it seems as a nostalgic longing back to the good old days under the successful iconoclast emperors, indicating that the iconodule version of the 1<sup>st</sup> iconoclasm wasn't the only way it was remembered in its immediate aftermath.

A very crude description of the issues at stake would be that the iconoclasts took, so to speak as gospel, the prohibition of idolatry in the Old Testament. The iconodules, on the other hand, claimed that this literally didn't apply to Christians, as the incarnation of God, as man, meant a new situation as it was possible to picture the man alone. The same line of argumentation was applied to (less) holy persons in general. It should be mentioned that Christian theologians had already defended holy pictures against Jewish and Islamic criticism, and arguments for and against got increasingly sophisticated as the conflict evolved. Important was the dogma of the trinity, and especially the united, yet separated, human and divine natures in Christ. One might say that to wrap the concept of

the trinity in logic is asking for problems, and that the logical consequences must be somewhat hazy.<sup>13</sup>

I will go deeper into the question below when my treatment of the different authors demands it.

---

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the earliest iconoclast arguments and developments, see (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 94-105). For a discussion of iconoclast views around 754, see (Ibid: 189-197). For a more traditional view, largely, but not quite, agreeing to the theological contents, but speculating roots or inspiration in the monophysite heresy, islam, and Judaism, see (Ostrogorsky 152f; 160-162). For 754 see (ibid 171-173).

### **3: First accounts, Nikephoros and Theophanes**

#### **3.1: Introduction**

The overall aim of this dissertation is to compare the manner that successive historians have portrayed Constantine V, but strictly speaking neither Nikephoros, nor Theophanes, can be said to accomplish this, apparently because they don't really try. Still I could hardly ignore them, the more because they together underlie most of what is known of our period, as well as the foundation for much of what have been 'invented'. Therefore it is indispensable to present them as sources, and furthermore to underline what perspectives they have on Constantine V, both being iconodules they are, to varying degrees, biased against Constantine. I have decided to treat them in one chapter, as it is nearly impossible to discuss the one without reference to the other. Thus I progressively compare them in the expectation that this will make the, not altogether trivial, differences between them stand out more clearly. The treatment in this chapter is not intended to be exhaustive, throughout the whole dissertation it will be necessary to return to successive generations of historian reception of (mostly) these two sources.

And though neither provides us with a convincing character sketch of Constantine, the mere reasons for failing to do that are important problems for the project at hand. I have chosen to refer to the place in the original manuscripts in **bold**, in addition to the pagination of the translation.

#### **3.2: Nikephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople and his *Short History*.**

Notwithstanding that Nikephoros is identified as Patriarch on the sleeve of the translation at my disposal, it seem most likely that he wrote his *Short History* in his youth when he was an imperial secretary, sometimes during the 780's (Brubaker and Haldon 2003: 171). He was born around 758 to a father who was imperial secretary, but on account of iconophile sympathies exiled, then recalled and again exiled. Nevertheless Nikephoros also entered imperial service, probably under Constantine V's less ardent son Leo IV (775-780). Serving under a later patriarch, Tarasios, he himself became patriarch from 806 until he was forced to abdicate on account of resurgent iconoclasm in 815. He died in 828 (Mango 1990: 1f).

Though a much later date for the composition of the *Short History*<sup>14</sup> has been suggested, it seems probable that it was written before the temporal restoration of icons in 787. Supportive of this early date are several surprising errors and otherwise inexplicable shortcomings which point to the history being an early essay into the realm of history writing (Mango 1990: 8-12). I accept the early date, but should not fail to admit that a later date would somewhat weaken several of the findings of this chapter. But after all my primary interest is not what actually happened, but merely the changing conceptions of historians. As it ends with the year 769, the text cannot be assumed to refer to extensive personal experiences on the part of Nikephoros, though it seems likely that he has heard tales about at least the later Bulgarian campaigns in his youth, and thereby in their immediate aftermath.

The *History* is in all probability the only history, intended as such, composed in Byzantium covering the period from ca. 602 to the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Mango 1990: 7). The question why the work of *Theophanes* isn't labeled a history will be dealt with below, suffice it at this point to say that Nikephoros has some similar shortcomings though differently accentuated. A short discussion of the sources of Nikephoros and the character of his bias is necessary.<sup>15</sup>

Without it being possible to identify these sources with any precision, we are at least able, mainly through comparison with Theophanes, to discern that Nikephoros had access to several which are lost to us. As the work progressed, it appears that he became less concerned about, or tired of, reworking these:

[W]hat Nikephoros did, [...] was to paraphrase into ancient Greek a small number of chronicle sources written in "vulgar" Greek. In the first part of his History he went to some trouble to camouflage the "chronicle element" and even suppressed [...] nearly all dates. In the final part [...] individual chronicle entries are barely disguised (Mango 1990: 6).<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Hereafter referred to as *History*.

<sup>15</sup> Amongst other works Nikephoros is also known for directly polemical text dated to the second iconoclasm (814-842). They are not considered here, as their scope is narrower towards iconoclasm, but it should come as no surprise that they contain overlapping information on the reign of Constantine, as well as elaborations on these themes (Mango 1990: 9). As far as the early date of Nikephoros history is accepted, it is of course invaluable for the tracing of the development of the iconophile tradition.

<sup>16</sup> This applies directly to our period, in most entries from 764 and onwards (Mango 1990: 6 note 16).

That is not readily apparent to me in the translation, but I take the word for it by someone who read classical Greek (or the approximation to it) that Nikephoros wrote. It means that he quite likely can have carried over bias from the texts he was translating, and that, the literary pretensions apart, what have come down to us is a far cry from an careful analysis in the modern sense. It is therefore perfectly possible that his history can be biased both against and for Constantine in different parts.

Being of the iconophile persuasion it comes as no surprise that he did not like Constantines V's religious policy: "Now [754] Constantine, who was completely determined to insult the church and was, by now, making war on piety (driven as he was by the evil spirit that directed him) convened a council [...]" (Nikephoros 1990: 72). It is somewhat more remarkable that in reporting his campaigns against the Bulgarians he freely admits that Constantine, to give one example, "pursued them mightily and killed many" (Nikephoros 1990: 73). Certainly his dislike of iconoclasm has not resulted in Nikephoros failing to report on positive aspects of the reign. It can further be noted that quite a lot of 'facts' detrimental (at least to iconophile eyes) to Constantine are mentioned in Nikephoros' later polemical works under the second iconoclasm, but absent in his *History* (Mango 1990: 9).

One might speculate that Nikephoros was moderating his critique for fear of repercussions if he was to openly hostile to the reigning dynasty. But if the history was supposed to be published before the first restoration of icons (787) the comments on Constantine's evil spirit would still sound rather crass, if it was later less cause for moderation would exist. To me the most reasonable assumption is that the mental climate and what was common assumptions about the exact nature of iconoclasm changed considerably during the iconophile period from 787 to 814, which also supports the early date of composition for the history.<sup>17</sup>

Of course one could consider everything positive a result of patriotism where even an heretical emperor's successes against a pagan foe are laudable, but Nikephoros is not adverse to reporting the occasional byzantine defeats throughout the history. Neither

---

<sup>17</sup> The assumption of the early date itself supports that change took place, and the neat correspondence here should be seen merely as consistency, not conclusive proof.



is the mention of positive achievements restricted to military matters, achievements like the restoration of the viaduct of Valens is mentioned too (Nikephoros 1990: 85).

### 3.3 Theophanes and his Chronicle

Theophanes Confessor was born ca. 760, and to be short he followed a career in monasticism. In 810 he fell ill with kidney stone, and in 815 he was exiled on account of opposition to the second iconoclasm. He died in 818, and like Nikephoros he was canonized after his death (Mango and Scott 1997: l-li).

Theophanes' *Chronographia*<sup>18</sup> was written between 810 and 813/4 and is a continuation of George the Synkellos' chronicle which ends in 284, and carries the history all the way to Leo V's coronation in 813. (Mango and Scott 1997: lii).<sup>19</sup> As stated by Theophanes himself, the foundation for his chronicle was the extensive work done by George, and the nature of Theophanes' role in the process has been the basis for much debate, but it is today generally agreed that Theophanes did compose the chronicle which bears his name on the basis of sources collected by George, instead of merely copying out a text written by the latter (Brubaker and Haldon 2003: 168 and note 7). Theophanes himself is only partly helpful in resolving that question, when in the preface he claims that:

For I, too, after seeking out to the best of my ability and examining many books, have written down accurately – as best I could – this Chronicle [...]. I did not set down anything of my own composition, but have made a selection from the ancient historians and prose-writers and have consigned to their proper places the events of every year, arranged without confusion. In this manner the reader may be able to know in which year of each emperor what event took place, be it military or ecclesiastical or civic or popular or of any other kind, for I believe that one who reads the actions of the ancients derives no small benefit from so doing (Theophanes 1997: 2).

However Theophanes imagined the difference between composition and mere

---

<sup>18</sup> I have chosen to refer to *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* simply as *Chronographia* throughout my text.

<sup>19</sup> That Theophanes mentions Leo IV (before his coronation) without any malice is proof that he finished writing before Leo took steps to reinstate iconoclasm as official policy around Christmas 814 (Mango and Scott 1997: lvii).

Arranging, it is clear that he (or George) didn't always quote their sources verbatim: "Theophanes tended to shorten or paraphrase some of his sources, so that he often produces sentences which are very confusing or difficult to understand" (Brubaker and Haldon 2003: 170).

One additional problem with the 'authorship' of Theophanes is that *Chronographia* seem not to have been published until after iconoclasm's final disappearance as official doctrine in 843 and it is questionable how 'stable' the text stayed over most of a generation. Quite glaring inconsistencies raise the question of what condition Theophanes left his manuscript in (if indeed it had been finalized as such), and it cannot be ruled out that at least some editorial tampering took place. No clear solution to that problem presents itself (Mango and Scott 1997: lxii-lxiii).

The *Chronographia* is a somewhat odd child in byzantine historiography. It abandons the classical historical narrative structure and instead rests on a rigidly structured chronological framework with anno mundi, emperors and foreign potentates' reigns and periods of ecclesiastical office holders, occasionally an indiction is offered too.<sup>20</sup> A keen interest in affairs in the near Christian east outside the political control of Byzantium resulted in an unusual breadth of the material incorporated in the chronicle.<sup>21</sup> Never the less the total number of sources being at the disposal of George and Theophanes is not estimated to have been far in excess of 20 (Mango and Scott 1997: lii-iv).

In comparison with the *Short History* the chronological framework supplies many opportunities to date the events reported on by both, but it also clearly shows that most dates have to be critically received, as internal inconsistencies are often readily apparent.<sup>22</sup>

When it comes to iconophile bias the *Chronography* is a considerably more outspoken than the *Short History* as his rendering of Constantine V's coming to power clearly shows:

---

<sup>20</sup> Indictional dates consisted of a 15 years cycle starting in 1 September 312, regrettably the cycles themselves were not numbered. Lacking a standardized method of absolute dating, indiction was the method most commonly used in the Byzantine world outside of scholarly circles (Mango and Scott lxiv).

<sup>21</sup> "No other Byzantine chronicler showed such an interest or breath of vision" (Mango and Scott 1997: lii).

<sup>22</sup> It has been known for a long time that Theophanes anno mundi and indictional date is consistently out of synchronization "from some time in the reign of Phocas (after 603) until at least 659 and again from 727 to 774" (Mango and Scott lxxv f and note 55).

It is now proper to review in succession the lawless deeds. Yea, even more sacrilegious and abhorred by God, of his [Leo III's] most impious and altogether wretched son, yet to do so objectively (inasmuch as all-seeing God is observing us) for the benefit of posterity and of those wretched and wicked men who still follow the abominably heresy of that criminal, namely by recounting his impious actions from [741 to 775], the year of his damnation. Now this pernicious, crazed, bloodthirsty, and most savage beast, who seized power by illegal usurpation, from the very start parted company from our God and savior Jesus Christ, His pure and all-holy Mother and all the saints, led astray as he was by magic, licentiousness, bloody sacrifices, by the dung and urine of horses and delighting in impurity and the invocation of demons (Theophanes 1997: 573, **413**).

I give this long citation (I will style it a 'prologue' on the reign of Constantine V and shall return to repeatedly in the discussion below) as it raises many important, though not entirely unproblematic, points about the character of Theophanes' bias, apart from admirably demonstrating differences between what he and we consider by being objective, apparently it is not to be disinterested and removed from one's subject.

For periods where we know the original source Theophanes is quoting from, it appears that his two 'usual' methods of introducing bias was by inserting adjectives into the text and by selective use of the sources at his disposal, including simply ignoring sources, or parts thereof, which didn't support his interpretation. Sometimes the misrepresentations seem to have their root in incompetence or carelessness (Mango and Scott 1997: xciv).<sup>23</sup> One informative example of coloring by adjectives is "a half-page narrative on Valens, [Theophanes] adds 'illegally', 'illegal', 'impious' and 'unholy' to Theodore's neutral account" (ibid). Comparing with the citation above this has almost certainly taken place, but in contrast Constantine is the outstanding representative of an extant, and not an extinct, heresy whereby he most likely merits a greater dose of 'slander'.

Mango and Scott also postulate an anti-Bulgarian bias in the latter part of Theophanes, and I certainly agree that Theophanes had less reason to love the Bulgarians than Nikephoros, as the Bulgarians were much more of an immediate threat in 813 than a

---

<sup>23</sup> He also sometimes 'improves' on the chronology of his sources (Mango and Scott 1997: xciii).

generation earlier.<sup>24</sup> This bias is “apparent by comparison with the parallel account of Nikephoros. Theophanes sometimes omits incidents in which the Bulgarians win a success or act in a manner helpful to the Empire” (Mango and Scott 1997: xciv). I suspect that something has gone wrong with that sentence, as it seems to me to be the other way around, which should become apparent below. It seems likely that this bias against the Bulgarians is mostly applicable *before* the reign of Constantine.

Though he introduces bias by selection and coloring and simplifies more literary sources, and cannot be taken as sole authority on dates, his interpretation “is mainly a simple association of success with orthodoxy and failure with heresy so that, despite the tampering, Theophanes is essentially stringing together a dossier of extracts from earlier writers” (Mango and Scott 1997: xciv). Another assessment sounds less optimistic: “In short, the *Chronographia* is an essential, but extremely tendentious and very complex source, which has to be used with the greatest caution (Brubaker and Haldon 2003: 170).<sup>25</sup>

### **3.4 Differences and similarities of Nikephoros and Theophanes**

I should not fail to briefly note that whether a historical work is conceived as a literary composition describing the activities and motives of the involved entities, be they personal or collective, or as rigid systematic assignation of mere events to separate years, is in itself an important question. Nikephoros seem to have imagined himself to be doing the first, filling a gap in a narrative about the progression<sup>26</sup> of the world and thereby creating literature, whereas Theophanes seems to be mainly setting out to bring a formal system of order to a ‘chaotic’ world, solidly fixating every event within a rigid system of several chronological restraints. Differences between them are informative as to the differences in the way individual authors and whole societies imagined the working of the world, maybe Theophanes was personally more fond of systems. Of more immediate

---

<sup>24</sup> In 811 the emperor Nikephoros I was slain in a disastrous battle with the Bulgarians, the first Roman Emperor to be killed in battle since the battle of Adrianople in 375. In the following years the Bulgarians roamed free all the way to the walls of Constantinople.

<sup>25</sup> The different degrees of optimism here could partly stem from the fact that Mango and Scott comments on Theophanes reliability throughout the *Cronography*, whereas Brubaker and Haldon focuses explicitly on the iconoclast period.

<sup>26</sup> I must stress that I certainly don’t intend to imply that Nikephoros had any concept about progress in the modern sense.

concern for the task at hand a principal difference consists in whether an author makes the chronological element subservient to ‘narrative’ elements, or if the opposite is the case. But even then we will rarely encounter clear cut archetypes and in the case of the *Short History* and the *Chronographia* the distinction should be qualified:

Byzantine annalists followed the Thucydidean model for the most part, with a ‘weak’ year by year framework tempered by thematic narratives in which particular issues are pursued, sometimes at the expense of any regular form in the yearly structure; chroniclers and ‘chronographers’, who organized their material on a model more obviously based around short yearly entries, were by the same token drawn to thematic narrative. (Brubaker and Haldon 2003: 165).

Indeed this holds true in our case. The *History* is very short, and it is common for Theophanes to give a fuller rendering than Nikephoros of the sources we must assume they both had access to: “[T]here is very little in Nikephoros that is not also in Theoph.,[sic] whereas the latter includes a considerable body of near-eastern origin” (Mango 1990: 15). They might have shared only one (Constantinople-centred) source for the reign of Constantine V, which may be assumed to end in 769, as that would explain why Nikephoros chose (?) to break off there, and would correspond to a dearth of Constantinopolitan material in *Chronographia* for the next four years (Mango 1990: 14).

Ease of comparison between the two texts is facilitated by extensive cross-referencing in both translations, and on rare occasions Nikephoros gives a fuller account than Theophanes. Where they differ most historians seem inclined to trust Nikephoros:

On the whole, it is generally agreed that Nikephoros presents a less heavily biased account of many of the events and developments portrayed, in other words less determined by iconophile propaganda where the iconoclast emperors and their deeds are concerned, but one which is often more concise or even superficial when compared with that of Theophanes (Brubaker and Haldon 2003: 168).

Unlikely as it might seem, the two appear not to have known each other or their individual historical works. The assumption that the *History* is both elder, and the fact that it is briefer, than *Chronographia* seem to support that. Anyway they pursued careers in different strands of the ecclesiastical sphere, Nikephoros filling official positions in the

state dominated church hierarchy, while Theophanes monastic position rather qualified as what we might compare to the private sector, Even though they both were iconodules there's no very good reason to assume that they should ever have worked together.

If, as I have referred to, the quality of Nikephoros' work was declining towards the end, this is to be regretted as this applies to Constantines later years and indeed fails to cover the last six. The more so as Constantine's reputation for being cruel is elaborated on by Theophanes especially towards the end of his reign, though Nikephoros' brevity on these subjects could stem not only from his general briefness but even more from his (supposed) tiring of his task.

Though the frequency of the application of adjectives on Constantine V differs, there seem to be a tendency that both use the derogative mostly in connection with religious matters. This might give rise to an assumption that they operated with a sharp divide between secular and ecclesiastical affairs, where actions in the secular sphere could not have an essentially pious or impious character as such.<sup>27</sup> That would explain why not even Theophanes saw the need to underscore Constantine Vs' impiousness on numerous occasions but always when ecclesiastical affairs were mentioned, rather than pointing to sources of differing degrees of bias. From Theophanes preface cited above in the beginning of 3.3 one might also (carefully) speculate that it was partly a question of genre. History looking far enough back could not be expected to have Christian heroes in any abundance, but still the 'benefits' to be attained from reading about the ancient cannot be supposed to be of an entirely 'hedonistic' character.<sup>28</sup> In his 'prologue' on Constantine V's reign he implies some didactical tasks on the part of 'objective' history writing too, namely against the iconoclasts. Of course the two introductions are likely to have been written with a long interval in time between them (approximately 450 years in his text, implying a long time also between the composition of the two parts) and we cannot expect him to have compared them as diligently as we might. In fact he probably didn't compare them at all. Reasonably supposing that he was no philosopher of history, we again draw close to a conclusion that immediate matters (iconoclasm and Bulgarians) orbited his mind like planets the sun as he described these very matters in the

---

<sup>27</sup> Though it does not follow that a dividing line can be discerned with any clarity.

<sup>28</sup> And many byzantine historians were familiar with non-Christian protagonists, as it was quite common to start with Adam.

*Chronographia*. As far as any *one* principle is consistently applied, it can only be that the religious aspect outweighs all others, to the extent where secular matters are implicitly of secondary importance.

We have seen that Theophanes habitually identified success with orthodoxy, and one of the subjects on which the two differ most are the Bulgarian wars. Briefly put, nearly all of Constantine V's Bulgarian campaigns are reported as successes by Nikephoros, whereas several (sometimes the same, and sometimes campaigns which are difficult to square with those mentioned by Nikephoros) are described as failures to a higher or lesser degree.

As an example is this account of a Bulgarian campaign dated to 763/4:

Of a sudden the emperor left the city and finding the passes unguarded because of the nominal peace, invaded Bulgaria as far as the Tounza. He set fire to the courts [maybe rather 'fortified camps'] that he came across and returned in fear without having accomplished any brave deed (Theophanes 1997: 603 **436**).

This *might* correspond to a campaign of 764/5 described thus by Nikephoros, who does not mention any 'nominal' peace being broken:

Constantine entered Bulgaria in order to remove from office their leader who had been appointed by Sabinos, a man called Oumaros, and proclaim in his stead the Bulgarian Toktos, brother of Baianos. The Bulgarians fled to the forests of the river Istros and many of them were slain, including Toktos together with his brother as well as others. Another one of their commanders, whom they call Kampaganos, was killed by his own slaves while he was attempting to escape to Varna and join {the emperor}. At that time a great many Bulgarian villages were burned and destroyed by the Romans (Nikephoros 1990: 153 **79**).

It has been speculated that the differences in the parallel accounts of the Bulgarian campaigns might be explained by the fact that Nikephoros was using an "official" version put out by organs of imperial propaganda" (Mango 1990: 219, citing Besevliev). The existence of official propaganda is always a possibility, but if other accounts existed Nikephoros would hardly have been necessitated to use the one most favourable to Constantine, and presumably such an account would not have been as garbled as it comes

down to us through Nikephoros. The goal of propaganda is, after all, *not* to encourage questions by being vague, furthermore it's likely that imperial propaganda would have stressed Constantine and the Byzantines' exploits more than internal Bulgarian political problems.

Rather it seems likely that the material available to Nikephoros some twenty years after the event was sparse or incomplete. As Theophanes account definitely smacks of an attempt to explain away a notable success (by making it look unglorious), it could be speculated (with reason as he is further removed in time than Nikephoros from the event) that the intervening years had seen the rise of several 'alternative' accounts on the Bulgarian campaigns. Theophanes probably didn't have to invent anything himself, but merely to choose from a whole range (all admitting a successful raid) of accounts the most heavily biased against Constantine V.<sup>29</sup>

As Leo V's essaying into a renewed iconoclasm often is linked to an association between iconoclasm and military success (not least against the Bulgarians) it should be reasonable to assume that Theophanes indeed (consciously or unconsciously) felt a need to downplay the martial actions of an iconoclast emperor, be it through selective use of sources or the addition of a 'returned in fear' in an opportune place. Indeed Theophanes shows an awareness of lingering iconoclasm not only in his 'prologue', but also in a famous account of how, when the Bulgarians were pillaging the Balkan provinces in 813, iconoclasts forced their way to Constantine V's tomb. There they implored him to rise up and they spread the rumour that he indeed was riding to do battle against the Bulgarians (Theophanes 1997: 684 **501**). To me this all points to the fact that the Bulgarian wars were by this time becoming no longer a purely secular affair, but moving into what might be considered the ecclesiastical realm, if only by association or immediacy.

This is, however, only a partial explanation. Though several disasters are seen as the punishment of God for impious politics (success associated with orthodoxy), they both entirely fail to attempt an explanation why God couldn't have used the Bulgarians to chastise Constantine V, if so only that God moves in mysterious ways. The answer must be that they didn't consider it necessary to formulate that question.

---

<sup>29</sup> The discussion here should show why I have so hard a time accepting the claim that Theophanes had an anti-Bulgarian bias. It might be true before iconoclasm, but it seems as if he hated the iconoclasts even more than he hated the Bulgarians.



The question is unfortunately complicated by the compilatory nature of the *Chronographia* and the complex nature of its authorship. Though we reasonably can identify parts to be mostly influenced by either Theophanes or his source (and I find it likely that both preface and ‘prologue’ are representative of Theophanes’ own viewpoints), we can’t take every inconsistency as proof of *one* author’s stupidity or absentmindedness. I myself fully think Theophanes capable of thinking straight at least through a whole sentence. Therefore I also take it as a clear sign of (entirely unsustained) bias when the prologue mentions ‘illegal usurpation’. Even if he unreflectingly copied out for 720 that “Constantine was crowned by his father Leo in the tribunal of the nineteen couches” (Theophanes 1997: 554 **401**), or if he forgot, there is nothing in his later account that can be read as a substantiation of that claim. And even then one might ask if not all usurpations are illegal, the conclusion being that Theophanes at some times simply let his bias get the better of him, while at the same time fondly imagining that he fulfilled the ideal of an objective historian. And we should at all times remember that Christianity had nothing to do with objectivity.

When we compare Nikephoros’ somewhat laconic reporting of Constantine inheriting the throne, we note that qualifiers on Constantine are entirely lacking, which might lead to the suggestion that Nikephoros reserves negative vocabulary on Constantine strictly to religious matters. This is not so, at least in connection with the report on low prices on food in Constantinople (just after the neutral report on the restoration of the aqueduct): “This was considered by the senseless as a sign of the earth’s fertility and the abundance of commodities, but by the wise as the result of oppression and avarice and as an inhuman sickness” (Nikephoros 1990: 161 **85**). Incidentally *that* piece of information has been used to prove quite different points about economy in later historiography on byzantium.

I would not say that the things said about Theophanes immediately above should not apply to Nikephoros, still he might qualify as a somewhat less radical iconophile, at least in the 780’s though he might have become just as radical in 814 as Theophanes, and for much the same reasons. That they seem not to have known each other (in any close sense) could be indicating that the iconophile camp could itself have been divided into a ‘clerical’ and a ‘monastic’ party. It can also be postulated that he in fact manages to

present a more balanced account of Constantine, and a comparison with his assessment of a former heretical emperor might be instructive:

As for Philippikos, he appeared to administer the empire in an indecorous and negligent manner. {In particular} he subjected to anathema the Fathers of the Sixth Ecumenical Synod because he did not accept the two wills and energies of Our Saviour that had been piously defined by them (Nikephoros 1990: 113 **46**)

It is interesting to see the example of ‘administration’ used directly referring to religious policy, but it would probably be more interesting to see how Nikephoros might have painted a more detailed picture of Constantine V. In general I must agree that he seems to be the more reliable of the two sources.

### **3:5 Our quest for the man inside the iconoclast emperor.**

Living in an age where everything is psychologized we should take care not to import our conceptions into the past, and it would indeed be strange if Nikephoros and Theophanes shared our conceptions on what makes up the totality in a man, and even if they would use a word like character it is highly unlikely that we would share an understanding of what that means across the centuries.<sup>30</sup> Coupled with that is the fact that both histories are little more than chronicles that never make any real attempt to point to inner consistencies (or inconsistencies) in the politics of Constantine. This is as we have seen probably both on account of the fragmentary nature of the source material and the mindset of our authors. Nevertheless it is clear to *us* that we should at least try to explain how such a monster could render so great services to the state, and indeed be grateful that their bias didn’t result in the suppression of all positive aspects.

In time history changed somewhat to become (fuller) person-orientated, not in the sense that persons didn’t matter to the ancients, but in the sense that personality (and the forces forming collective consciousness) were seen as more complex. It is likely that the weakening, or at least change, of religious (Christian) sentiments was a prerequisite for

---

<sup>30</sup> Both mention an episode where, after a great shipwreck in connection with a Bulgarian campaign. “The Emperor was greatly distressed by this and commanded the officers to cast nets in the sea in order to collect the drowned bodies and bury them (Nikephoros 1990: 157 **82**). Theophanes has basically the same report with the common colouring against Constantine (Theophanes 1997: 605 **437**). Neither reflects on this hardly being the actions of a man indifferent to religion and piety as such.

this to take place, and to continue our quest for the (conceived) personality of Constantine the V we make a jump forward of nearly exactly 1000 years to an historian who had an approach which was intentionally rational and critical to many, if not most, aspects of Christianity.

## **4: Enlightenment and prejudice: Edward Gibbon**

### **4.1.1 Introduction**

It would seem that to all concerned it would be an understatement to call Gibbons “*The History of the Decline and fall of the Roman Empire*” (hereafter referred to as “*Decline*”) monumental, and it is far from being an easy task to treat the man, his work and its context in one short chapter. Though I will use biographical literature on his authorship, this should be seen rather as establishing some important problems and areas of investigation, than the final word on what Gibbon actually meant to do, and how well he accomplished it. My treatment will mostly narrow down to what he reveals in the parts of his work that pertains to iconoclasm, Constantine V and Byzantium. John Bagnell Bury will, as he is up for treatment in my next chapter, be granted a prominent voice in the assessment of the relative merits of Gibbon. This is the more convenient, as Bury is the editor of the version of *Decline* which, for this very reason, I have chosen to use.

### **4.1.2 Gibbon**

Edward Gibbon was born in 1737 as son of an English country gentleman, and though sickly the only surviving child of his parents. His education was somewhat erratic though broad in scope, quite symptomatic is that he became fluent in French when he was promptly dispatched to Lausanne in Switzerland to a Calvinist minister, after converting to Catholicism in 1753. Though only a year passed before his reconversion, by his own statement with true conviction to Protestantism, he spent several years in Lausanne, and emigrated there in 1783. It was there he wrote the part of *Decline* covering the iconoclast years, finishing the task in 1788, but returning to England shortly before his death in 1794 (Burrow: 1985: 4-15). This moving back and forth between England and Switzerland, combined with the onetime mental switch of religions, points to a diverse cultural experience and, at the same time to an interest in religion which was, however, not fixed from the outset.

### **4.1.3 The context; Gibbon, humanism, enlightenment and Rome**

Gibbons context was quite different from Nikephoros and Theophanes, and his authorship coincides of course with what we call the enlightenment. It doesn't matter as much whether he be considered an integral part thereof, but more that he shares in a tradition from the humanists, where at one time the classical world is rediscovered, and at another a programme to surpass it is formulated. With the growing of science in a sense where it begins to become recognizable to our concept thereof, it also becomes possible to scrutinize religion in a qualitatively new manner. When it comes to practical politics, where under official religion can also be subsumed, Machiavellianism can be seen as having a strong influence, and it should be possible to recognize pragmatism in the parts of society that haven't entirely given themselves over to the idealism of the enlightenment.

It is not impossible to draw some parallels between the 1<sup>st</sup> British Empire and the late Roman Republic, and between the English and Republican aristocracies: "Gibbon was, after all, himself a member of an oligarchic, exclusive but constitutionally free and powerful state" (Burrow 1985: 43).

The interest in classical Rome, in 1764, led Gibbon, as so many contemporary gentlemen, to visit that ancient site, and according to his own testimony it made a lasting impression. It is probably impossible for one who only has access to the physical site of modern Rome, however scattered it still is with remains, to visualize quite how momentous the ruins of that once centre of a renowned empire was then.<sup>31</sup> And how strong a reminder it was to the fragility of every empire, and an impetus to undertake a survey into the factors that drove empires to fall, maybe even the present British (Burrows 1985: 1-3).

#### **4.1.4 Gibbon and his Roman Empire**

There might thus be seen a didactic/ preventive aspect to Gibbon's immense undertaking, but it might pay dividend to briefly consider the relationship between *antiquarian* interest in history for its own sake, and the *philosophes* of the enlightenment's instrumental approach to history.

---

<sup>31</sup> Indeed I haven't even been there, though I don't regret that as much as never having visited Constantinople either. Even though it is Istanbul, it's Constantinople I would look for.

There might even be an observable movement in *Decline* from the last to the first, the *philosophes* position (as a synthesis between the positions of Hume and Montesquieu) can be briefly and crudely summarized as such: Under the mere facts and occurrences can be discerned some universal principles, both as laws that make it possible to predict future effects of actions, but also a universal unchanging human nature, which to some extent makes it possible to gain secure knowledge of past occurrences from the effects we can observe today. The goal of the study of history thereby becomes the ability to control the future in exactly the same way as the other sciences aspire to tame nature. Against this universalism can be set the antiquarian position which does not aspire to be more than an interesting, though sometimes didactical useful, laying out of the past for the enjoyment and amusement of fellow men.

#### **4.1.5 Gibbon and the sources**

Gibbon was not the first ‘modern’ to write about Roman history, and among important earlier writers Bury singles out Tillemont (1637-98), a French ecclesiastical historian who wrote an (at least then) still useful history on Roman emperors up to Anastasius I (491-518), and notes that the quality of Gibbon’s history, as opposed to literature, declined past that point, though the clear narrative of Procopius somewhat assists in making the slope gentler. It is pointed out that later scholarly works, and the addition of new primary material, have considerably improved the historian’s position after Gibbon (Gibbon 1909a ix f, editors introduction).

It follows that Gibbon made extensive use of the primary sources available to him, and he had access to both Nikephoros and Theophanes, but there he was labouring under the disadvantage of not being as proficient in reading ancient languages as Bury himself:

He had not enjoyed that school and university training in the languages and literature of Greece and Rome which is probably the best preparation for historical research. His knowledge of Greek was imperfect; he was very far from having the “scrupulous ear of the well flogged critic” (Gibbon 1909a: ix, editors introduction).

If these are indeed still the best qualifications for a historian, I’m doomed to fail.

This is, however, not only elitism, but points to the fact that history writing at that time *had* to rely heavily on written sources, and primary sources in original language, as neither translations, nor ‘scientific’ works existed for most of the eager new historians. He wasn’t helpless, though, and in the acts of the iconodule council of Nicaea 787 he is able (as at least the first of *my* historians) to observe this on the 754 council of Hieria: “[T]hough it is stigmatized by triumphant bigotry as a meeting of fools and atheists, their own partial and mutilated acts betray many symptoms of reason and piety” (Gibbon 1911: 269f). That at least no historians I have encountered will deny.

But apart from, as will be elaborated below, establishing Roman history as lasting until 1461, Gibbon’s undying achievement is the scope (even plot) of, and the way which, he wrote *Decline* which is indisputably a fine piece of literature.

#### **4.1.6 Gibbon and literature, irony as style or obfuscation**

Under this heading I primarily want to admit to a difficulty facing me, and probably most others, in reading and understanding Gibbon, as one salient stylistic characteristic is his irony. I shall not exhaust what can be said about his irony, or elaborate on the way also the French Enlightenment used irony to hide some of the more controversial, or even illegal, opinions from sensors and reactionaries in general, but briefly note *my* problem. English not being my native language, I still struggle with some of the finer nuances, and anyway few write it today as Gibbon did. When my distance in context is also considered, it can sometimes be hard to be sure *exactly* what Gibbon is saying, especially whether he is ‘for’ or ‘against’. Irony is, after all, a kind of conspiracy between writer and reader, where both are supposed to share the common ground making it possible to ‘get it’.<sup>32</sup> It works through connotations rather than denotations. I’m not entirely, after all Gibbon and we share quite a lot, and most of the time I find his style very enjoyable, *and* quite intelligible. I am myself fond of irony, and suspect that personal preferences contributed heavily to Gibbon’s adapting it. But sometimes I really can’t be sure what he is saying. And it is very apparent that he considered literary style to be of no mean importance in the writing of history.

---

<sup>32</sup> Of course irony exists outside of writing. In the jargon of science of documentation I would use terminology designed to include all forms of utterances, nay even ‘documents’, but don’t get me started on *that*.

## 4.2 Gibbon's iconoclasm.

In contrast to my Byzantine sources, Gibbon wrote at a time when another example of iconoclasm had not only shaken the Catholic church, but succeeded to a degree where the split in western European Christianity must have seemed, to most contemporary observers, permanent and irreversible. As Gibbon, not surprisingly, is referring to protestant authorities in his interpretation of iconoclasm, we might speculate that the picture of the byzantine iconoclasm is to some degrees coloured by the instances of 'iconoclasm' which, in some areas, followed on the Reformation<sup>33</sup>. Without a special investigation of that question, it can only serve as backdrop, where we keep in mind that unspoken sympathies and identifications might be at play in the contextual background from whence the whole problem arises. It is also important to remember that secularization, not exclusively in protestant areas of influence, has landed science and scholarship in a situation where also religion is approached from the perspective of rationalism. Criticism of religious beliefs is not uniform, but presupposes a hierarchy where absurdities (superstitions) are scorned upon while more abstract and 'ethical' dimensions can be applauded or at least tolerated. It should be remembered that this is in no way straightforward, and only to some extent consciously realized.

Finally there are also the iconoclast activities of the early Christian church, which may have concerned itself more with tearing down statues of heathen deities than with graven images. Still, on the background of that activity any use of holy pictures, as we have seen, at least for a quick glance might readily be seen as hypocrisy, and for a reflecting upholder of religious practices exactly a backdrop to heathen practices.

Without determining exactly how bad in itself Christianity was for Gibbon, or precisely how, and how much it contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire, it is clear that he conceives of the two as closely intertwined:

---

<sup>33</sup> This in itself might have been, to some extent, influenced and inspired by the iconodule spin on the deeds of the iconoclasts (destruction of sacralia, anti-monasticism and hostility to the cult of saints in particular). If that is so, it is a profound and exquisite example of the irony of history. As we will see the possible relationship or parallels between iconoclasm and the reformation have not been overlooked by all historians.



But I have reviewed, with diligence and pleasure, the objects of ecclesiastical history, by which the decline and fall of the Roman Empire were materially affected, the propagation of Christianity, the constitution of the Catholic church, the ruin of Paganism, and the sects that arose from the mysterious controversies concerning the Trinity and incarnation. At the head of this class, we may justly rank the worship of images, so fiercely disputed in the eighth and ninth centuries; since a question of popular superstition produced the revolt of Italy, the temporal power of the popes, and the restoration of the Roman Empire in the West (Gibbon 1911: 261).

I shall return to this quote later, first I follow Gibbons outline of the development of Christian image worship. In the beginning it was fiercely opposed to any kind of pictorial (or sculptural) representation of divinity, as the “public religion of the Catholics was uniformly simple and spiritual”. [As paganism and its practices faded from sight and memories, and by degree the devotion that could be given *through* a picture] “were transferred to the copy” (Gibbon 1911: 262f).

Using Gibbons own words, it is easy to read in to them a disdain for this process:

The scruples of reason, or piety, were silenced by the strong evidence of visions and miracles; and the pictures which speak, and move, and bleed must be endowed with a divine energy, and may be considered as the proper objects of religious adoration. [...] The use, and even the worship, of images was firmly established before the end of the sixth century; they were fondly cherished by the warm imagination of the Greeks and Asiatics; the Pantheon and Vatican were adorned with the emblems of a new superstition; but this semblance of idolatry was more coldly entertained by the rude barbarians and the clergy of the west (Gibbon 1911: 263f).<sup>34</sup>

It would seem natural if Gibbon, on this background, applauded iconoclasm as a step in the right direction from a more gullible and garbled form of religion, and towards a less hypocritical official stance. However, as he draws parallels to the Reformation, he instead, through a comparison of the ‘cultural’ backgrounds, suggests why iconoclasm was bound to fall short of its goals:

---

<sup>34</sup> Gibbon derives the gist of this, though importantly not the language, from the protestant Basnage’s *Hist. des Eglises Rêformèestome ii*. Gibbon declares that the protestants “can venture to be impartial” (Gibbon 1911: 264 note 6). By proxy he thereby buys into the version which postulates the firm establishment of ‘the cult of images’, which we will see Brubaker and Haldon dispute in chapter 7 The importance here is that *Gibbon* saw the iconoclasts as innovators and not defenders of already established religious practices.

In the long night of superstition, the Christians had wandered far away from the simplicity of the gospel; [...] the holy ground was involved in a cloud of miracles and visions; and the nerves of the mind, curiosity and skepticism, were benumbed by the habit of obedience and belief. [...] In the reformation of the sixteenth century, freedom and knowledge had expanded all the faculties of man, the thirst of innovation superseded the reverence of antiquity, and the vigour of Europe could disdain those phantoms which terrified the sickly and servile weakness of the Greeks (Gibbon 1911: 270f).

For what we would call structural and/or discursive reasons iconoclasm was therefore doomed from the outset, and thereby in a sense futile and unnecessary, and little real gain could excuse any bad effects it might have for empire or inhabitants: “The sect of the iconoclasts were supported by the zeal and despotism of six emperors, and the East and the West were involved in a noisy conflict of one hundred and twenty years” (Gibbon 1974b: 269). Leo III, as instigator of imperial iconoclasm, is granted a moderating strain by Gibbon, but the word ‘sect’ strongly hints at Gibbon seeing the iconoclasts at large as religious fanatics themselves; ‘despotism’ underlines an important difference to the reformation, which famously was not sponsored by any emperor, and I dare to speculate that Gibbon leans to the point of view that the state shouldn’t involve itself in the *details* of religious matters, but restrain equally any kind of fanaticism. I think I draw some support for this in an often cited passage from Gibbons initial description of the Roman Empire, so to speak before the fall:

The policy of the emperors and the senate, as far as it concerned religion, was happily seconded by the reflections of the enlightened, and by the habits of the superstitious, part of their subjects. The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosophers as equally false and by the magistrate as equally useful (Gibbon 1909a: 31).

This is, however, only an ideal, and there’s no reason to assume that Gibbon imagined that any imperial policy could bring that happy situation back.

### **4.3 Constantine V Copronymos**

In his short chronological survey of Roman emperors from Heraclius to Andronicus, Gibbon first ridicules the iconodule sources' shameless exaggeration of the vices and inhumanity of Constantine, underscoring that several of the accusations are obviously ridiculous. Let's have a taste:

In his religion, the iconoclast was an Heretic, a Jew, a Mahometan, a Pagan, and an Atheist; and his belief of an invisible power could be discovered only in his magic rit, human victims, and nocturnal sacrifices to Venus and the dæmons of antiquity (Gibbon 1911: 199).<sup>35</sup>

Some of it, though, is to be believed: "Without adopting the pernicious maxim that, where much is alleged, something must be true, I can however discern that Constantine the Fifth was dissolute and cruel" (ibid). Against these flaws, however, is set a list of laudable achievements from his reign, as indeed they spring from the pages of Theophanes and Nikephoros, a fact that Gibbon does not fail to make clear. It is fairly comprehensive, though the weathering of the plague is at most hinted at:

Yet the character of the Fifth Constantine was not devoid of merit, nor did his government always deserve the curses and contempt of the Greeks. From the confession of his enemies, I am informed of the restoration of an ancient aqueduct, of the redemption of two thousand five hundred captives,<sup>36</sup> of the uncommon plenty of the times, and of the new colonies with which he repopled Constantinople and the Thracian cities. They reluctantly praise his activity and courage (Gibbon 1911: 199f).

I choose to break off here, though the list is longer, I trust my reader gets the idea. Unfortunately I fail to see how Gibbon can discern the cruelty of Constantine anywhere else than exactly in the mass of accusations against him, though he does attempt to show that mutual dislike between the iconodules (conceived of mostly as monks) and Constantine *must* have escalated, though as, again in chapter 7, we will see that the whole conflict reasonably can be argued to have been more low key than it appears in the

---

<sup>35</sup> Not all of this inventory of vices is to be found in Nikephoros and Theophanes, some derives from the later iconophile tradition. It could be a study in itself how these later sources 'improved' the description of iconoclasm in general, and Constantine specifically, but it is not the path I have chosen to follow.

<sup>36</sup> And I failed to mention them in chapter 2, other than as part of diplomacy. Maybe Gibbon is touched deeper than me by this act of pity? Anyway I initially missed that 2500 people was a lot in those days.

sources. But a problem with the iconoclasm of Constantine is, in short, that he was overdoing it.<sup>37</sup> In another chapter his reign is thus summarized:

His long reign was distracted with clamour, sedition, conspiracy and mutual hatred, and sanguinary revenge; the persecution of images was the motive, or pretence, of his adversaries; and, if they missed a temporal diadem, they were rewarded by the Greeks with the crown of martyrdom (Gibbon 1911: 272).

It is interesting that the quote above, which is connected with the usurpation of Artabasdos keeps open the possibility that holy pictures were but an excuse for claiming the throne, as few later historians (until recently) have failed to see Artabasdos as a fervent defender of icons, and it is tempting to speculate what Gibbon might have arrived at if he had given Constantine the same space and effort as he grants emperors as Justinian.<sup>38</sup>

Instead Constantine blends into the long line of emperors who did little else than preside over the steady decline of Rome, where any step in the other direction is but temporary and in a perverse sense wrong, as it is counterproductive of the ‘goal’ of Gibbons history, which, in a very pronounced way, *is* the fall. In this perspective every kind of improvement is meaningless, any territorial gain temporary and every effort and victory ultimately wasted: “Under the reign of Constantine the Fifth, the union of civil and ecclesiastical power had overthrown the tree, without extirpating the root, of superstition” (Gibbon 1911: 294f).

Again we should also bear in mind how difficult it is for Gibbon to imagine anything grand and deserving of prize from the ‘lower’ empire, being superstitious and Greek Constantine is bound to fail and can’t escape our blame.

---

<sup>37</sup> The following remark from a footnote strongly suggest that Gibbon is longing for a party to sympathise with here: “In the field of controversy I always pity the moderate party, who stand on the open middle ground exposed to the fire of both sides” Gibbon 1911: 275 note 20).

<sup>38</sup> Of course it isn’t only prejudices and lack of patience which channel Gibbon’s interest away from the dark ages of Byzantium, but the deplorable fact that the available sources are so sparse as they are. Even then it seems clear that the space allotted, the individual emperors in chapter XLVIII, and the summary way in which they are dispatched of, indicates a prejudice against most of them.

Or can he? It so happens that Gibbon singles out one emperor in the period 640 to 1185 who is worthy of universal praise, John II Komnenos (1118 – 1143).<sup>39</sup> Furthermore for a few, namely Basilios I (868 – 886), and Basilos II (976 - 1025, Alexios I (1081 – 1118) and Manuel Komnenos (1143 – 1180) Theophilos (829 – 842) and Leo III (717-741) “our esteem and censure is almost equally balanced; and the remainder of the Imperial crowd could only desire and expect to be forgotten by posterity” (Gibbon 1911: 259).

Though they of course did as little as Constantine to assure the ultimate survival of the Roman Empire, those were as all men capable of earning credit for their acts and their reigns, and it would be unfair to Gibbon to let his prejudices towards the ‘Greek’ Emperors indicate an inability to discern between them in one way or another. All are caught up in historical processes which, in the long run, they cannot absolutely control, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they should just resign and surrender to ‘fate’. The mere facts of change and historical processes militates against such a stance, whether or not one perceives an undercurrent of eternal causes that cannot be turned by even the most valiant and diligent of mankind.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly the two last in the list (in my arrangement) were iconoclasts, and if Leo is seen, also by Gibbon as more moderate than especially Theophilos and Constantine V, he is never the less the traditionally accepted instigator of iconoclasm, and anyway it is the same Theophilos that usually is seen as as keen an iconoclast as Constantine.<sup>41</sup>

Iconoclasm in itself can thus scarcely be the sole issue at stake here, and there are furthermore interesting parallels between the reign of John II and Constantine V; both took over power from fathers who had saved the empire from external foes and internal ‘anarchy’, and both had to overcome initial resistance to their orderly succession (though they differed somewhat and John’s later reign was less troubled than Constantine’s). Both

---

<sup>39</sup> I can’t remember having read any history that said anything really bad about John II, though of course not everybody is equally impressed. Gibbons short account of his reign and character, with some slight doubts about the unconditional beneficiality of his clemency, is to be found in (Gibbon 1911: 243f).

<sup>40</sup> There appears to be a paradox in connection with an *philosophes*’ disinterest in details of the past, which is determined by eternal undercurrents, and the act of contemporaries which can shape and improve the future. Gibbon might be said to avoid that, at least in principle, by allowing past events importance in their own right, though not all are equally important.

<sup>41</sup> My impression is that Gibbon actually manages to be fairly objective about iconoclasm; in a quite disaffected manner he stays aloof and does not deign to declare himself in favour of any of the two extremes.

led their armies on numerous (often nearly annual) occasions, most often meeting with success, without significantly enlarging the borders of their empires, but arguably by preempting enemy action increasing the internal security of the Empire. Both had fairly long reigns and left the empire an orderly succession. Of the of course several differences, the most glaring is that John was irreproachably orthodox, but less to be applauded as not heretic (but per definition still superstitious) than not interfering in ecclesiastical affairs.

When it came to territorial losses or gains, the fluidity of the borders in Asia Minor make it difficult to speak with absolute certainty for the reign of John, a fluidity which only recently has received the full attention of historians. But as noted before some definite losses *did* occur during the reign of Constantine, in the outlying area of Italy. In military strategic terms the more serious loss was probably the loss of Ravenna, but the loss of another city, which to a modern cynic that concerns itself with Constantine as *Byzantine* emperor would appear in most respects (apart from some symbolic importance and as patriarchal seat) as just another provincial town, would for one who wrote about the Roman Empire appear as a most momentous and decisive. To Gibbon Constantine V is the Roman Emperor who irrevocably lost Rome.

Whatever the (principal or practical) merits of moderate iconoclasm might be, Gibbon (as we saw earlier) states clearly that it was the alienating of the popes which paved the way for the secular papal state and thereby the independence of the popes, and an indispensable prerequisite for the 'rebirth' of the 'Roman Empire' in the west; Iconoclasm constitutes the first part of, and the rise (and decline) of the Carolingian and the German empires the last, of chapter XLIX and is narratively firmly connected.<sup>42</sup>

In the introduction to chapter XLVIII Gibbon seems partly to acknowledge that bias, in defending the scope of his history:

[T]he fate of the Byzantine monarchy is *passively* connected with the most splendid and important revolutions which have changed the state of the world. The spaces of lost provinces was immediately replenished with new colonies and rising kingdoms; [...] it is in their origin and conquests, in their religion and government, that we must explore the causes and effects of the decline and fall of the Eastern Empire. Nor will this scope of narrative, the riches and varieties of

---

<sup>42</sup> This is the more thematic chapter where, besides the itinerary of reigns, most information on Constantine and iconoclasm is to be found. (Gibbon 1911: 261-33)

these materials, be incompatible with the unity and design and composition [...] the historian's eye shall be always fixed on the city of Constantinople (Gibbon 1911: 182).

I argue that there does seem to be a little confusion here what the focus is, even though I fully applaud the wide perspective and attempted contextualization. If iconoclasm sparked the revival of the Western Empire, surely it should be counted not as a passive force but as an important shaper, even though it never intended a western Empire to rise?<sup>43</sup> Again It seem as if Gibbon's heart is not really in it, that whatever may be the focus of his eyes, his *mind* is not on the city of Constantinople.

In the introduction to this chapter I briefly touched on the importance of the city of Rome (and the ruin thereof) as in a very physical sense the inspiration for Gibbon to embark on his great project, and that alone could be an argument for a (largely unconscious) preference for the site. Another related example is found in his discussion about Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos (912-959), or rather the inventory of the themes of the empire some 200 years after Constantine V that is attributed to either his author- or sponsorship. In a grudging appraisal of the (relative) diligence of the Byzantines, and the (somewhat) improved and useful, though incomplete record left us by this antiquarian emperor, Gibbon praises *Our* good luck: "It is fortunate that the clearest light should be thrown on the most interesting province, and the name of PELEPONNESUS will awaken the attention of the classic reader" (Gibbon 1912: 72f).

Most Byzantinists will agree that, with the possible exception of the last couple of hundred years, there's nothing special about the Peloponnese in Byzantine times, and I will argue that Gibbon here, as well as numerous places scattered all over *Decline* that mentions Rome, gives his true priorities away, an obsession shared with many Englishmen of his own class and century. This is probably a cocktail of indoctrinated habit, half admitted climatic determinism and more general essentialism which lends so much importance to 'classical' locations, that the otherwise earnest and thorough project of discerning and appraising historic developments (to some degree) founders on. I will argue that Constantine certainly does, and his failure to ingratiate himself with the popes, and to give military priority to some outlying provinces, is likely to degrade him in a

---

<sup>43</sup> What is at work here *might* be a distinction between the *intention* and the *effect* of an act.

comparison with John II who didn't lose any essential parts of the 'old' Roman Empire. When it comes to the loss of the Exarchate of Rome and Ravenna, there is for me no compelling reason to think that a revitalized Frankish kingdom should not have intervened in Italy in a decisive manner, or alternatively that a union of the Lombard kingdom and principalities should likewise have taken over these areas. After all, Byzantium had been steadily losing Italian territory for close to 200 years, and geostrategic factors might easily have been strong enough to balance out any benefit gained from harmony in religious practices, a harmony which in any event wasn't very pronounced or secure.<sup>44</sup>

This is, mildly put, not exactly the same deliberations as Gibbons, on the other hand he partly exonerates Leo III who (in the traditional view) alienated the pope and the westerners with his iconoclasm in the first place. So I will assign the loss of Rome a place among the (mostly) subliminal causes, and speculate that it is the contrast between John II's clemency and Constantine's perceived cruelty and intolerance, as well as the contrast to Leo III less ardent or fanatical iconoclasm, which further mark the most important and more rationalized difference here. I should point out that Gibbon probably never made a specific comparison between John II and Constantine, a point in its own right.

#### **4.4 Summary**

Gibbon bears Constantine no ill will for being an iconoclast as such, himself being perfectly comfortable about persons of status and influence having religious views, and probably considering himself to be in some way 'religious'. The important thing is to be

---

<sup>44</sup> The whole issue of Italy in the Byzantine Empire is both difficult and fascinating, and it does indeed take some conscious effort to entirely steer clear of the shawl of Rome here. Briefly told the good sense of Diocletian in dividing up an unmanageably large political body is questioned by Justinians re-conquest, or in reverse Justinians good judgment I sbrought into doubt by the re-conquest, and the advantage of a strategic area weighed against yet another military commitment is uncertain at best. Throw into that the real or imagined importance of the pope (who until 800 was after all only the 5<sup>th</sup> patriarch, and the potential benefits or drawbacks of having him as a subject who often diverged in his view on theological details from the 'oriental' parts of the Empire, and we have a very difficult equation. The question is somewhat relevant here, and my personal judgment is that it was a reasonable priority on the part of Constantine that led or forced him, when it came to military-strategic decisions, to focus on areas closer to the core territories of Byzantium, while literally keeping a foothold on the Italian peninsula.



polite about it.<sup>45</sup> However he is vaguely felt to have let something important (Rome) slip out of some kind of negligence, and just as importantly he is seen as a (cruel) religious fanatic. This corresponds well with the hardly disguised prejudices towards the medieval and Christian Greeks, and though Gibbon is aware that some real (however temporary in the big scheme of things) achievements could and should be attributed to him, he let the religious quarrels largely overshadow and define the reign of Constantine. Though Gibbon is quite balanced when it comes to iconoclasm, and I fail to see him as much on the side of the Christian iconoclast emperors as he was on the side of the pagans suffering the early Christian iconoclasts, he is quite dismissive of Constantine, and admittedly he did little (unless one looks deeper) that were not overthrown or jeopardized by the generations immediately following him. And that, after all, fits extremely well with Gibbons overarching narrative, so the incentive to look that deep, even if the sources allowed it, was slim.

---

<sup>45</sup>Consider this brief quote: “at an unseasonable moment the Isaurian Emperors attempted somewhat rudely to awaken their subjects” (Gibbon 1912: 116). The word rudely is of course dripping with irony, here aimed at their opponents as well.

## 5 Science and rationalism

### 5.1 Introduction

As mentioned before my reason not to use the earliest possible edition of Gibbons *Decline*, is that a later edition (widely regarded as the best) was edited by one of the influential early ‘Byzantinists’, John Bagnell Bury:

Between 1896 and 1900 he brought out a seven-volume edition of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, providing the great work of another rationalist anti-clerical writer with a scholarly apparatus of notes and appendices which discussed the views adopted in the text and presented contemporary scholarship (Whitby 2013,: 4).<sup>46</sup>

In this chapter of my dissertation I will utilize the introduction and notes from that edition, as well as Bury’s own *History of the Later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene* (hereafter *History*) in two volumes, (Bury 1889a and Bury 1889b). Worthy of note is that Bury wanted no truck with the expression ‘Byzantium’ about the empire as such, but reserves this name for the city of Constantinople itself; this must be remembered to avoid confusion in reading Bury, and it is important for his ‘relationship’ to Gibbon.<sup>47</sup> At the most he will admit that from the coronation as Roman Emperor of Charlemagne in 800 it makes sense to speak of an Eastern and Western Roman Empire. I intend, after brief biographical notes on Bury and his context, to show first how Gibbon and Bury correspond in their take on the Byzantine Empire, whereupon I will discuss how these two ‘rationalist and anti-clerical’ historians could differ as much on their views on Constantine as they did.

### 5.2 Bury

---

<sup>46</sup> I have not obtained the very first edition (of Bury’s edition), but a reprint of a ca 15 years later edition.

<sup>47</sup> This attitude might not only seem, but actually be, somewhat pedantic. Never the less it does call deserved attention to the continuity of Roman history over the span of 2 millennia, conversely the term ‘Byzantine’ stresses the developments peculiar to those parts of the Roman Empire that ‘survived’ the change of religion to Christianity. The convention today is to call it Byzantine, and when not otherwise stated it is the term I adopt myself, though I would prefer ‘Christian Roman Empire’ (avoiding any use of ‘holy’). On a deeper level the preference is tied to whether one stresses continuity or discontinuity in this, as in other, areas of history.

Born in Ireland in 1861 John Bagnell Bury was introduced to Latin and classical Greek at a young age, and was in that way admirably fitted to set out to use sources on Byzantium in a systematic and authoritative manner, but his intellectual interests were not constricted to history alone, he started out as a classical philologist. His 1889 *History* got instant international recognition, and in 1893 he achieved his first professorate (of modern history) at Trinity. He was productive nearly to his death in 1927, by no means exclusively, but mostly, on Byzantine history. When it comes to The Roman Empire in its widest sense, he had more sympathy with the Hellenic traits than the merely Roman. (Whitby, 2013).

An early advocate of ‘Byzantine’ studies, he can be seen to have neglected cultural and economic dimensions in history. Yet he was, at the same time, a pioneer in scientific history, striving to avoid personal moral judgment and showing a

refusal to portray any major character from later Roman history, although he admitted the relevance of personal qualities and motivation in the historical process [...] Bury contended himself with providing readers with materials to form their own character assessment while not committing himself (Whitby, 2013 5f).

However, as we shall see, he was not above the occasional apologetic, and luckily for my dissertation he did hazard some opinions on aspects of specific policies of specific emperors.<sup>48</sup> The choice of phrase ‘character assessment’ can imply that the reluctance to portray should be seen, not as sympathy for, or even focus on, the small and common, and thereby quantifiable or average. It is a refusal to make any *moral* judgement on especially rulers, he is still to a large extent weighing the objective, and thereby scientific, importance of their reigns and policies, as I hope to show below. He was not entirely blind to the ‘softer’ aspects of history, but his attempt to bring structure to history, evidenced by a lot of small chapters on single topics, indeed make their (and most other topics’) interrelationships less pronounced than might be desired. On the other

---

<sup>48</sup> He *did* feel compelled to make brief assessments in Gibbons chapter LXVIII mentioned above concerning many of the briefly treated reigns. Thus he finds it imperative to remark: “Constantine was an uncommonly able and vigorous ruler, unceasingly active in endeavours to improve the internal administration, and successful in his military administration” (Gibbon 1911: 199, editor’s note).

hand this same compartmentalization makes for clarity, and his *History* is for the most part still quite readable.<sup>49</sup>

It might pay dividend to consider what, to Bury, was a programme for scientific history as set out as early as 1882:

Study of history offered mankind a chance to advance through the progress of knowledge, but, for history to supplant the institutionalized power of centuries of religious restraint, it would need to be conducted with exceptional rigour, hence the need for scientific history. By emancipating itself from literary approach to historical evidence [...] history could proclaim its independence and, though remaining a humanistic discipline, attain the precision and objective truth with which the sciences were currently credited (Whitby 2013: 3).

It is nearly possible for me to see Bury sitting and looking over the shoulder of Gibbon, correcting his historical errors and pointing to break throughs in the sources, while at the same time immensely enjoying his literary qualities. And I have no problem believing that Bury must have felt it as a heavy sacrifice indeed to abandon this magnificent but anything but precise style, in the name of science and progress. And there is a cruel irony in the fact that Bury's rigorous (and indeed very precise language) can be claimed as being in itself a literary style, lending credit to the fiction that the sciences were indeed absolutely objective, the (post) modern view is implied by Whitby's phrase 'currently credited'.

His scientist bend notwithstanding, he is not adverse to occasionally going to some depth in the numerous theological disputes he encounters, and we must remember that 'religion' was not an objective term used to describe many metaphysically based systems of belief, but mostly reserved for Christianity and its roots. Not all religion had yet turned into superstition, and no doubt Bury had been introduced to the protestant theology during his upbringing. However he realized that, with early Christianity, he was navigating waters far from known shores, and he deemed it prudent to bring the following qualifier, with which I have the warmest sympathy, being in the same boat myself: "It is always hard for for a layman to feel quite certain that he has

---

<sup>49</sup> Each of his volumes starts with a chronological table of the period covered, primarily listing the names of rulers. This should not be construed *solely* as a fetish for tables, at the time of his writing the establishment of a clear chronology was still a priority.

comprehended the technicalities of theological phraseology or penetrated the inmost mazes of theological mystery” (Bury 1889a: 195 note 1). I, being devoid of any belief in the trinity, are even further from shore.

Scattered throughout the text is also sometimes quite extensive translations of primary sources, which Bury supplies for the reader to judge themselves, and an attempt to convey to the modern reader the ambience of the late ancient or early medieval period.

### **5.3 Bury, Gibbon and the fall of ‘Rome’**

In Bury’s, and most later byzantinist’s eyes, Gibbons great achievement as a historian is his inclusion of byzantine history up to the very fall of Constantinople in 1453, or rather to 8 years later. Yet Gibbon will be eternally blamed for the way he treated the last millennium, and the prejudices we saw in the last chapter are probably still, to some extent, operating to this very day. More proficient in ancient Greek than Gibbon, Bury also represents a more modern scientific approach to the sources (Quellenkritik), and directly acknowledges that both scholarly treatises and the number of available sources had grown over the past 100 years, and some sources had been rejected as not genuine. Also numismatics and sigillography have made great strides since Gibbon wrote. (Gibbon 1909a: editors introduction: vii-xi).<sup>50</sup>

Gibbon relied on instinct rather than method in his dealing with sources: “Gibbon’s historical sense kept him constantly right in dealing with his sources, but he can hardly be said to have treated them methodically” (Gibbon 1909a: editors introduction x). Far worse, but partly a consequence hereof, is his contempt for the Byzantine Empire:

But Gibbon’s account of the internal history of the empire after Heraclius [610-641] is not only superficial; it gives an entirely false impression of the facts. If the materials had been then as well sifted and studied as they are even to-day, he could not have failed to see that beneath the intrigues and crimes of the Palace there were deeper causes at work, and beyond the revolutions of the Capital City wider issues implied. Nor had he any conception of the great ability of most of the emperors from Leo the Isaurian to Basil II [717-1025], or, we might say, to Constantine the

---

<sup>50</sup> However, when it comes to Constantine’s reign the main narrative sources available to both, and to us, were largely the same.

conqueror of Armenia.<sup>51</sup> The designation of the story of the later empire as a “uniform tale of weakness and misery” is one of the most untrue, and most effective, judgments ever uttered by a thoughtful historian. Before the outrage of 1204, the empire was the bulwark of the West (Gibbon 1889a: editors introduction xvi).

In a footnote (excluded by me in the citation) Bury refers this to the same chapter (xiviii) and statement as that I have drawn from in 4.3 above, and I have only delayed the full refutation because this is properly left to Bury, and it is very much to the point that *he* makes it. Also worthy of note is the conception of Byzantium as the bulwark of the west, where the able emperors, in the big picture with a dualism between occidentalism and orientalism, are given credit for serving the cause of history. This shows how scientific history now operated with concepts of historical forces, but also how credit was still given to (or withheld from) individuals who can hardly be said to have been conscious agents of that course or force. Bury is constantly on the lookout for the rules and laws of history, and repeatedly he identifies recurring themes and parallels (sometimes quite farfetched), and we shall see at least one example below.

This fondness of system is borne out admirably when he in an appendix to the ‘quick and dirty’ listing of 600 years of emperors in chapter 68 suggest the subdivision in (mostly) dynasties and identifies a recurring cycle. He even sets up a nice little ‘graphic’ to illustrate his point. (Gibbon 1912: editors appendix 9, 554f). Another attempt on improving on Gibbon is filling out the narrative where Gibbon failed to go into detail, an example is the long spaces devoted to the Lazic wars of Justinians reign (Bury 1889a: 441-468). This, rather tedious, narrative made possible by lots of tactical detail in the sources (which are sorely missed for Constantine’s wars), is justified thus:

I have dwelt on the details of these wars at some length, partly because Gibbon has passed over them lightly as undeserving of the attention of posterity. But the idea of writing history for its own sake was strange to Gibbon, and in any case the operations in Lazica concerned serious interests. The question was at stake whether the great Asian power [Sassanid Persian Empire] was to have access to the Euxine, [Black Sea] and these operations decided that on the waters of that sea the Romans were to remain without rivals (Bury 1889a: 466).

---

<sup>51</sup> I can think of no other Constantine than the 5th as candidate for this title, but it is a problem (to be remarked upon later in 5.5) that it doesn’t fit him *that* well at all.

And *I* have gone to some lengths to show how progress in the art, become science, of history explains some differences between Bury and Gibbon, but also lastly how Gibbon, also in Bury's own *History* on occasion explicitly seem to merit attention. That was nearly 125 years ago, but it might even today seem like Gibbons ghost is always present at the byzantinists' banquet, here he practically dominates the first half of my chapter on Bury. Now is the time to leave him behind, and take a look on what is, though made by a fellow anti-clerical rationalist, a very different take on Constantine's Iconoclasm.

#### **5.4 Iconoclasm and rationalism**

In Bury's opinion there was nothing futile or odious about the iconoclast 'movement':

The adoration of pictures tends to become a most degraded form of superstition, as uneducated minds fail to distinguish between the sign and the thing signified; and it naturally leads to other forms of credulity. [...] Thus picture-worship was selected by Leo the Isaurian as the main point of attack. But what especially interests us is that Leo III, Constantine V, and their party were animated by a spirit of rationalism, in the same sense that Luther was animated by a spirit of rationalism. They were opponents, not only of iconolatry, but also of Mariolatry [worship of Mary]; they did not believe in the intercession of saints, they abhorred reliques which were supposed to possess magic potency. They were, moreover, especially Constantine V, the sworn enemy of monks, whom they justly regarded as the mainstays of superstition and mental degradation; for although [...] some of them were learned men, the large majority was ignorant, narrow-minded, and obstinate (Bury 1889b: 428f).

For Bury the truly dark ages of Byzantium is the 7<sup>th</sup> century, where learning was in rapid decline and superstition overcame the more rational Roman spirit. The 7<sup>th</sup> and most of the 8<sup>th</sup> century are to us 'dark', if nothing else because of the nearly complete lack of contemporary historians, or for that matter other kinds of literature other than religious. But that very situation makes it difficult to mark out a turning point. It might be argued that the military disasters and territorial contraction in the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> necessitated a concentration of resources for military purposes, thereby starving education, or conversely that 'cultural' decline was the *cause* of the near military and

political collapse. Likewise iconoclasm can be seen as the very lowest point (with monasteries being turned into barracks and stables). Considering the monasteries as a kind of safe houses for the remaining culture will make iconoclasm (in as far as one accepts the iconophiles' reports that it was anti-monastic) harmful to cultural revival. Conversely by conceiving of the monks influence as purely negative culturally, and disastrous demographically, the iconoclast period becomes the first step up the ladder to cultural and political renewal. Bury's preference for the latter interpretation, and his somewhat elitist outlook is borne out in the chapter "Social and religious decay in the seventh century":

When I speak of the deplorable extent of superstition, I do not refer primarily to the lower classes of society, among whom it prevails at all ages. The degrading feature of the end of the seventh century, which the Emperors of the eight tried so manfully to reform, was the ignorant credulity of the richer classes; and this credulity was generally accompanied by moral obliquity (Bury 1889b: 387).

We see here how the lower classes credulity is conceived of as a kind of constant in history, and how a recurring theme (a spirit of rationalism) asserts itself at intervals. Furthermore we see Bury very much identifying with the iconoclast movement, in as much as the 'programme' conforms to the strategy he himself would have adopted, had he found himself in the shoes of Constantine. For even if Leo is seen as the instigator and inventor of iconoclasm (and this partly, if not primarily as a pretext for battling superstition and the institution of monasticism), Bury was keenly aware of Constantine's taking the process one step further:

CONSTANTINE was an apt pupil of his father Leo in the lessons of autocratic government and the assertion of imperial supremacy in ecclesiastical affairs. But in the matter of iconoclasm his little finger was thicker than his father's loins, and he detested so intensely the superstition and stupidity which were fostered by the monks that he ended by persecuting them with a sort of passionate bitterness (Bury 1889b: 460).



Two somewhat interrelated strains should be pursued here, autocratic government and the passionate persecution. First it should be noted that Bury's sympathies are not merely aristocratic, but indeed autocratic.

In discussing whether Justinian I was a great and beneficial emperor or simply a despot, Bury discerns between a biographical (individual) and a historical (universal) viewpoint. In the individual the great man, influenced by vanity and egoistical motives, are personally, or rather morally, to blame though his actions lead to beneficial results in an utilitarian sense. On the other hand the historical context, here the defective economy, can be blamed for not living up to the great schemes of the visionary ruler. The conclusion is that these two viewpoints should cancel out each other, but are otherwise dead ends; We cannot use modern distaste of absolutism as an argument for condemning Justinian's actions and ambitions out of context, as that is anachronistic. That the majority of the population no doubt, and with good cause, found paying for Justinian's great achievements an intolerable burden is freely admitted, but not considered to be of real consequence (Bury 1889a: 353f). History itself (but thereby in the last resort the historian, however objective) is called upon as judge: "[H]istory justifies him [Justinian] by the event as she justifies all her true children" (Bury 1889a: 353). As we have seen 'Byzantium's' historical mission was no longer to rot a thousand years, but to shield European culture (in the form of a rationalized and demystified protestant Christianity) from oriental despotism, until in full time this culture was capable of asserting itself and set about civilizing the rest of the world. Arguably the biggest difference between Gibbon and Bury (as historians) is this very conscious idea of historical *progress* with one self at the, at least temporary, peak.

About the (reported) harshness of these measures when it came to forcing through the great rationalist program, especially the direct persecution of monks, this could be excused by the fact that, in Bury's eyes monasticism was a direct cause for the eventual decline and fall of the empire, a cause which with the defeat of iconoclasm was left free to once more rot the empire from within:

Constantine V could not be blind to this aspect of the monastic system, nor could he fail to see that it stood in direct antagonism to the interests of the state. [...] The measure of compelling monks to marry proves, I think, that a desire to redress the evil of depopulation, as well as the motive of

eradicating superstition, determined Constantine's policy. It may be added that the enormous ravages which the great pestilence made among the inhabitants of the Empire rendered the population question more important and pressing than ever. If we once realize that not merely ecclesiastical differences of opinion, but social and political problems of the greatest magnitude, were involved [...] we shall be more able to comprehend and ready to make allowances for the unrelenting severity with which he suppressed men like Stephanus who [...] as he plainly saw, was undermining and ruining the empire (Bury 1889b: 467).

Here the plague is mentioned, but even in dealing with the plague Bury was not overly squeamish. He connected outbreaks of plagues (or pestilences) with moral and spiritual changes. Thus, in brief, he hypothesized that as mind and matter are to some extent influences on each other, it is not unconceivable that small biological changes accompany spiritual change, and that these changes facilitate the spread of pestilence, even if they do not give rise to the plague itself (Bury 1889a: 400f). in the great scheme of the transformation of the antique to the medieval, the first outbreak of the great plague under Justinian marks the beginning, and its last outbreak under Constantine the ending, of the process of change or renewal: "The plague itself contributes to the formation of a new world by clearing away the effete population and making room for new settlers, while only the fittest of the old inhabitants survive its ravages" (Bury 1889b: 453). Apart from remarking that obviously Darwinism has happened between Gibbon and Bury, it is tempting here to see how Constantine, like the plague, is not personally to blame for some (necessary) unfortunate misery, but a force of nature.

### **5.5 Constantine, the Conqueror of Armenia**

The disinterested objective historian is an ideal that, in my opinion, is very useful when one tries to lay down the big picture and discern long range developments in history. When it comes to micro history it is, quite to the contrary, an important goal to eschew the context of one's subject, and as far as possible become that subject. In that case a degree of objectivity is still needed, so it isn't one's own self which is set in a strange world. However it is an ideal, and no matter how detached Bury tried to become, at both levels, it seems clear that he sympathised very much with Constantine. His actions seem reasonable, because it is the actions Bury himself found necessary, and therefore they

seemed to Bury as rational personal teleological choices. He actually argued against them being accidental results of a more puritan approach to Christianity, an eventuality he doubtless felt compelled to comment on as he was aware of such religious milieu in his own time. Thus he takes pains to assure us that the iconoclasts were in no way austere fanatics, but actually incurred their enemies' criticism by displaying a healthy regard for the material world (Bury 1889b: 461f). This also points to Bury very much thinking about present Protestantism in his treatment of iconoclasm.

In that matter, as so many others, we see that Bury quite happily accepted at least the subject matter of the iconophile propaganda, while at the same time he often warned us that it is the enemies reports we have to rely on. Apart from the obviously ridiculous he accepts most reports, merely making another interpretation of the actions, regarding as beneficial what the iconophile party saw as heretical and harmful. Thereby he very much let his selection of sources influence by his preconception of what a spirit of rationality contains. And iconoclasm here becomes a whole package of policies which have nothing to do with idolatry or pictures, except that Bury saw idolatry as the precursor of other kinds of superstition, and incidentally the whole package coincides with what separates Protestantism from Catholicism.

That Bury didn't manage to stay entirely impartial is also, to me, borne out by not only by use of adjectives like 'manfully' but also the fact that he sometimes praises Constantine more than he strictly speaking merits. A case in point is the title as Conqueror of Armenia as Bury is fully aware that the taken cities were later abandoned and their Christian population merely (and immediately) transplanted as settlers within the bounds of the empire. Indeed it can be seen as a great achievement that a roman Emperor for the first time in 100 years were successfully campaigning far across the border with the caliphate, still there is no question of actual conquest. And as Bury made iconoclasm the very hub of the reforms of the first Isaurian emperors, it seems very clear that it is indeed iconoclasm that recommends Constantine so warmly to Bury.

## 6 Cultural and social struggles, George Ostrogorsky

### 6.1 George Ostrogorsky

George Ostrogorsky was born in St. Petersburg in 1902 and died in Belgrade 1976. He emigrated to Germany in 1918, and finally to Belgrade in 1948, where he founded “des Instituts für Byzantinistik” at the Serbian Academy of Science (Academic dictionaries and encyclopedias 2013).

Ostrogorsky is a giant in modern Byzantine studies, authoring a throng of detailed studies on Byzantium and having to his name one of the modern standard works on the Empire, which I have chosen to use: *History of the Byzantine state* (hereafter *Byzantine*) (Ostrogorsky 1968).<sup>52</sup> This has arguably gone a long way to introduce the subject to the modern public, furthermore it's difficult to open a book on Byzantium without having Ostrogorsky heavily represented in the foot notes. That, however, is both a pointer to him standing for traditional views (nearly a paradigm), and many of his views being on many counts heavily debated.<sup>53</sup>

What becomes apparent from the list of movements is not only the opportune (and very understandable) times of shifting his country of residence, but also that his background is not English but mostly from Slavonic countries. Thus he also becomes important for my study, as the Slavonic people and Byzantium had a profound impact on each other. He is also my only modern ambassador of orthodoxy, in so far as someone able to make a scholarly career in communist [socialist?] Yugoslavia can be considered to be orthodox.<sup>54</sup> Compared to Bury he represents a more developed scientific approach to history, in the sense that Marxist (or materialist) ideas have entered into the fray, but his cultural interests are also very apparent, I would say even to a bigger degree. Medieval studies had a relative freedom from political interference in the eastern block (and Yugoslavia's belonging to that block is even ambiguous), in any event the 1<sup>st</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> With Byzantine I wish to stress the point that Byzantium for Ostrogorsky was an entity in its own right.

<sup>53</sup> A good example is his theory of the theme system being a result of a single bout of reforms under Heraclius (Ostrogorsky 1968: 95-100). few seem to agree today, but it is still to a large extent Ostrogorsky's view they argue against, even if they are not exclusively his 'inventions'.

<sup>54</sup> Of course he can be considered orthodox, in the same sense that I can be considered Lutheran, notwithstanding that I left the Danish State church more than 20 years ago. That doesn't fundamentally change the cultural context I sprang from. Yugoslavia itself was to be sure also Catholic and Muslim, and not even entirely Slavonic, but at least Belgrade was anchored in a firmly orthodox tradition.

(German) edition of *Byzantine* hails back to 1940. If he was in some, however vague sense, religious and not merely of orthodox cultural background, he didn't give that away in what I have read, though he had a pronounced interest in the theological questions involved in the many heresies, of which Iconoclasm (at least for the next several hundred years) was only the last to visit the Byzantine Empire.

In *Byzantine* he achieves to be at the same time more chronological and more thematic than Bury in his narrative, not devoting a full (but short) chapter on each emperor or phenomenon, but treating them as they appear in the overall synthesis of political, cultural and economic developments. This can be seen as partly a necessity, as he treated in just 200 pages what Bury covered in 1000. Sometimes his judgments, such as they were, seem to appear from the headings of chapters as much as direct statements in the text, as should be partly expected from a tightly tailored narrative framework. Of immense value is that he still found room to present to us the relevant sources in the beginning of each main chapter.

## **6.2 The troubled birth of Byzantium**

For the first time (here) since Theophanes Ostrogorsky hazarded a personal sketch of Constantine:

Constantine V was an even greater military commander and a more violent iconoclast than his father. Morally and physically he was by no means the tough soldier that Leo III had been. Nerveous, seriously impaired in health, a victim of unhealthy passions, he was a complex, divided personality. The excessive brutality with which he persecuted and tortured his religious opponents proceeded less from primitive cruelty than from abnormal hypersensitivity. He owed his brilliant victories over Arabs and Bulgars, which made him the idol of his soldiers, to the insight of a calculating strategist, allied to high personal courage (Ostrogorsky 1968: 167).

I can't restrain myself from acidly remarking that this sketch, considering that he had no more sources available for it than I have, seems something of an achievement. There is (of necessity) some quite heavy extrapolating, for one thing I've already commented of the complete lack of evidence for Constantine's battlefield tactics, though

his military record is impressive.<sup>55</sup> The basis for postulating a health issue I already commented on in 2.3.1, and expressions like ‘excessive brutality’ and ‘victim of unhealthy passions’ seem to imply both a judgment on Constantine, as well as accepting at face value much of Theophanes’ slander.<sup>56</sup> Never the less he at least seemed to give the devil his due, and I shall later argue that this sketch is indeed carefully thought out.

But first we need a closer look on what role iconoclasm, in the opinion of Ostrogorsky, played for Byzantium and for history as such. It indeed seems like he didn’t have as monolithic a conception of the role of Byzantium as my earlier historians, not even as the Orthodox Empire. Crucially he differs from Bury in his overall view on the development of Byzantium, setting the turning point and restoration much earlier:

During Phocas’ reign in Constantinople (602-610) the aged and worn out late Roman Empire was in the throes of its death struggle. [...] The revolutionary fever which had seized the empire led to an uncontrollable reign of terror accompanied by fierce internal struggles (Ostrogorsky 1968: 83).

It was for Ostrogorsky natural to see a new order rising out of revolutionary chaos, after all that is what revolutions, in the modern sense, are for. The great man that seem to be invariably following such a state, in this case Heraclius, then set about reforming and reorganizing, in the process founding a new dynasty.<sup>57</sup> This was destined to be the hero of a whole chapter: “The struggle for existence and the revival of the Byzantine State (610-711)” (Ostrogorsky 1968: 87-146).

In this the system of *themes*, in the first instance restricted to the remaining Byzantine possessions in Asia Minor, together with a leaner and more effective central administration, was postulated as the most important reforms of them all. In the short term it made possible to turn the table on the Persian invaders, in the long run it formed the basis upon which the Empire made its great advances politically and culturally in the centuries to follow. In short the themes (as we know them from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, were

---

<sup>55</sup> To be precise it was the general lack of details in the narratives through the 200 years of ‘dark ages’ I lamented in chapter 5). Though ostrogorsky surely have read some later iconophile sources which I have not, these are unlikely to have dwelt in any length on Constantine’s victorious battles.

<sup>56</sup> Ostrogorsky was perfectly aware of the bias of Theophanes: “Theophanes lacks depth of scholarship, historical insight and an objective approach” (Ostrogorsky 1968: 88).

<sup>57</sup> I a sense the first real dynasty in Byzantium (ostrogorsky 1968: 144).

areas (provinces), where the civil and military power was concentrated in the hands of one imperial official, often styled strategos. The soldiers under his command were free landholders, who in return for the land held from the state were under obligation to turn out as soldiers when called upon, the land as well as the obligation on it being hereditary. In addition to the land they also received some pay in cash, but, to the relief of the strained treasury now denied the income from the rich oriental provinces, considerably less than before ( Ostrogorsky 1968: 95-100).

Exactly when these reforms were introduced must be a matter of conjecture, few now believe that Heraclius had anything to do with them, and in any event everybody has agreed that territorially it was a process stretching over hundreds of years, as Byzantium incorporated areas over which authority got progressively reasserted. The reason for choosing this early inauguration of the system of themes (with connected administrative reforms), is that it offered the only solution to a seeming paradox:

The militarization of imperial administration and the reorganization of the armed forces explain what otherwise appears to be an incredible change of fortune in the war with Persia in the twenties of the seventh century (Ostrogorsky 1968: 100).

It does, however, offer less of an explanation for the unbroken string of early Arab victories and conquests, but to be fair that is a *very* complicated problem in its own right. Ostrogorsky argued that the reforms not only matured, but also through infusion of new, mainly Slavonic settlers, during the rest of the Heraclian dynasty slowly built up the empires shattered manpower. The grievous territorial losses notwithstanding, the period 610 to 695 saw many important reforms, and gave the Empire a sound and revitalized foundation:

During [these years] the Byzantine Empire had the hardest struggle for existence which it had ever known, and it underwent the most fundamental internal reorganization. Conqueror of the Persians and Avars, Byzantium had nevertheless to surrender extensive and wealthy territories to the Arabs. [...] Radical internal reforms and the infusion of young unexploited sources of energy from without brought a fresh lease of life to the worn-out late Roman Empire. Its military system was tightened up and given a measure of uniformity and the army was reorganized by settling on the land small-holders with military obligations, and finally, a strong free peasantry developed who

brought the land under cultivation and as tax payers formed the mainstay of the imperial exchequer. These fundamental principles were established in the seventh century and on them rested the future strength of the Byzantine polity (Ostrogorsky 1968: 145).<sup>58</sup>

The setbacks might partly be explained by special causes and developments in neighboring areas, anyhow the empire was not free from internal religious conflicts in the period. In his discussion of these (which were largely spin offs from the monophysite heresy), Ostrogorsky was quite detached and objective, avoiding any clear condemnation of either orthodoxy or heterodoxy in this question (Ostrogorsky 1968: 107-109).

On one point he did, as it seems, opine. Constant II's attempt in his 'Type' to achieve ecclesiastical unity by forbidding people to discuss the subject: "it was useless to attempt to resolve religious difference of opinion by ignoring the real problem at issue and suppressing freedom of speech" (Ostrogorsky 1968: 118). As this remark can hardly mean that religious intolerance and suppression is to be preferred, as long as discussion at least is allowed (thereby identifying who is to get punished for the wrong opinion), it seem to be an argument for freedom of speech in general, as indeed the use of the term in the present context seems somewhat anachronistic.

At least Ostrogorsky agrees with Bury that culturally it was a barren century: "Thought this age [the 7<sup>th</sup> century] saw many heroic battles, it produced comparatively little in the way of cultural activity" (Ostrogorsky 1968: 145). Indeed there might be a pointer in the fact that it is just after the reign of Constantine we again possess contemporary narrative sources. That in turn implies that the intellectual climate, in as far we dare use such a phrase, wasn't in decline during the reign of Constantine.

### **6.3 A balanced account of Constantine and his reign**

The heading of the chapter on iconoclasm (seen as the defining problem of a whole era) emperors is informative: "The Age of the Iconoclast Crisis (711-843)" (Ostrogorsky

---

<sup>58</sup> It might be remarked that an alliance between an autocratic government and a class of free, but relatively poor, subjects against the aristocracy have been a commonplace in the last more than hundred years of history writing about state building.



1968: 147- 209). The disputes in the preceding century were justified by being attempts at compromising between diametrically opposed religious views in the empire:

Earlier on the hatred of the Syrian and Egyptian monophysites towards Byzantium had facilitated the conquest of the eastern provinces, and now the defence of North Africa was hampered by the animosity of the western orthodox population (Ostrogorsky 1968: 118).

In contrast iconoclasm, after the loss of these confessionally opposed territories was largely a fact, seemed somewhat unnecessary. This crisis was also seen as the reason why Byzantium could not immediately set out on the course prepared by the reforms of the Heraclian dynasty. However important Byzantium's resisting the Arab onslaught was, it was by no means the sole purpose of the empire. It should not surprise us that Ostrogorsky, writing from a Slavonic angle, stressed the importance of Byzantium as the civilizer of the Slavonic peoples who had spread over much of Eastern Europe, the nominally Byzantine possessions in the Balkans included. Indeed the upsurge of Byzantine studies that Ostrogorsky can be seen as being himself a result of, as well as a further conduit for, is a strong pointer to the fact that Eastern and South Eastern Europe asserted that these areas have a history in their own right. In comparison with Bury it is, to be sure, not as monolithic, neither as teleological a concept of a historical mission. Rather it is an awareness of the role historical developments and entities play in the formation of the world as the historian knows it. Thus the iconoclast's legislative activities, derided by the iconodule successors, had a special value for the formation of Slav nationalities: "it exercised decisive influence upon the development of law in Slav countries beyond the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire" (Ostrogorsky 1968: 160). An unintended beneficial effect of iconoclasm can even be admitted in the case of Leo III, as he punished the pope by curtailing his power:

Thus the great champion of Iconoclasm laid the foundation for the upsurge of the Byzantine Church by extending the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Constantinople to the Balkan provinces of Illyricum and the Hellenized region of South Italy. Once it had survived the iconoclast crisis, the Byzantine Church experienced a rapid revival which was followed by the powerful dissemination of its influence and civilization among the Slavs in the Balkans (Ostrogorsky 1968: 170f).

An upsurge in Iconoclast measures was identified with Constantine himself, nevertheless developments in his policies was discernable and his (and Leo III's) activities are not seen as entirely conforming to an initial all-embracing plan of action, and certainly not as singly inspired by rationalism: "[Leo III] was strengthened in his resolution by a severe earthquake which, as a true son of his age, he regarded as a sign of divine wrath directed against the use of icons" (Ostrogorsky 1968: 162).

Concentrating on Constantine, his personal role in formulating Iconoclast doctrine before the council of 754 is judged (and I choose the term carefully) as "influenced by occult and oriental conceptions" (Ostrogorsky 1968: 171). It is only after this council's endorsement of iconoclasm as official doctrine that Constantine's iconoclasm really gets into its stride. The destruction and replacing of icons with secular art (for it is observed that the hostility was not against art as such) was by Ostrogorsky believed to have been effective throughout the empire, employing the means of "fire and sword" (Ostrogorsky 1968: 173).<sup>59</sup> The opposition is not excused of fanaticism themselves, and this opposition was seen as principally rooted in monastic societies, thus leading to the campaign against monks, which incidentally benefitted the state materially:

Persecution of the iconodules became more and more a crusade against monasticism, [...] Monasteries were closed or converted into barracks, public baths and similar public buildings, and their vast properties confiscated by the emperor (Ostrogorsky 1968: 174).

In a note this is qualified:

The opposition to monasticism was a by-product of iconoclasm which first became noticeable in the sixties of the eight century. Practically nothing is known about anti-monastic measures under Leo III, or even in the first half of Constantine V's reign, although it is obvious that the predominantly monastic and thoroughly iconodule sources on which we rely would certainly have made the most of any such measures had there been even the slightest hint of anything of this kind (Ostrogorsky 1968: 174 note 2).

---

<sup>59</sup> Ostrogorsky was aware that this was apparently the second time in 30 years all religious pictures were destroyed, and that they had reappeared during a relaxation of iconoclast activities after the death of Leo. In the next chapter we will see this assumption challenged.

But *when* the sources ‘hint’, Ostrogorsky was, as we saw, as ready as Gibbon to accept that Constantine was personally cruel.<sup>60</sup> Maybe the limited space available to him can excuse the leaving out of some of the beneficial actions, but when it comes to Constantine’s resettling depopulated areas (and thereby revitalizations), he merely acted “[i]n accordance with the traditional methods of Byzantine policies” (Ostrogorsky 1968: 167). The restoration of the aqueduct of Valens is passed over in silence, and like Gibbon Ostrogorsky fails to mention the plague.<sup>61</sup> When it comes to the formation of the tagmata, they are completely ignored until they, in the context of the reign of Leo VI (886-912). (Ostrogorsky 1968: 250f). On the other hand the breach with Italy (politically and religiously) was at most only *triggered* by iconoclasm, as it was already in the reign of Leo III “long-delayed” (Ostrogorsky 1968: 164).

But the achievements attributed to Constantine were, as postulated, primarily military in character. As he was quite consistently victorious, he must have been a general of no mean ability, and the complicated plan of campaign which he on several occasions employed against Bulgaria shows that he was alive to the possibilities to be derived from possessing a naval force. This last is, however, a sign of strategic ability, and I find that Ostrogorsky generally was somewhat muddled in his conception of the differences between tactics and strategy. He did observe that the change of fortune in the wars against the caliphate derived partly from the shift of dynasty with associated problems, nevertheless: “Constantine V’s victories on the eastern frontier did symbolize the turn of the tide: Byzantium was no longer fighting for its very existence, but could at last take the offensive” (Ostrogorsky 1968: 167).

Against Bulgaria exterior factors also somewhat assisted Constantine’s indisputably successful campaigns, as Bulgaria was impeded by something looking suspiciously like a class struggle, though the opposing sides also translated into a pro-Byzantine and an anti-Byzantine party. The reservation that Constantine, in spite of a

---

<sup>60</sup> There are other examples, consider a phrase like :”This fanatical lust for destruction” (Ostrogorsky 1968: 174). One reason why Ostrogorsky had a harder time than Bury in showing a detached utilitarian attitude to harsh measures, could easily be that he himself have felt how it is to be trampled underfoot in the march of history.

<sup>61</sup> To be sure, the plague was not an achievement of Constantine, but his handling of it with resettling of people from the Peloponesus certainly was. And as plagues usually get the blame for every collapse, it is remarkable that on this occasion the effects were managed quite well. I will tentatively agree with Bury that a collapse after a plague usually is a sign that something else is ‘wrong’.

major success in 773 had to fight the Bulgarians for the rest of his life, seem somewhat misplaced, as he died only 2 years later, even if it was during yet another Bulgarian campaign (Ostrogorsky 1968: 168f).

But even though the city of Rome did not possess the same attraction to Ostrogorsky as to Gibbon, this was indeed the prize to be paid:

The great successes of Constantine against the Bulgars and Arabs were largely achieved at the expense of a foreign policy which concentrated upon the Eastern sphere of influence. No ruler in Byzantium had ever shown so little concern for the maintenance of imperial authority in Italy (Ostrogorsky 1968: 169).<sup>62</sup>

Also it is hinted that the Bulgarian wars were not really necessary, and partly provoked by Constantine's resettlements in the Balkans, a statement Ostrogorsky has directly from the primary sources. Also, Constantine's successes were a future liability, as "Bulgaria had now become the bitter enemy of Byzantium" (Ostrogorsky 1968: 168f). This last reservation compares badly with the justification for Constantine IV's Bulgarian war: "Constantine IV was not blind to the fact that the presence of these warlike peoples on the northern frontier constituted a serious threat to the Byzantine state (Ostrogorsky 1968: 126). It shouldn't make things any better that this war ended in disaster for Byzantium, but luckily for the fourth Constantine he belonged to the right dynasty.

So my final assessment of Ostrogorsky's biographical sketch of Constantine V is that it, on the one hand condenses and somewhat softens Theophanes', throwing in a little psychology, on the other hand clearly acknowledges Constantine's military triumphs. Only the military and the religious/moral dimensions are mentioned, the political/administrative dimension is completely lacking. Thereby we get the impression that only Constantine's superhuman military abilities allowed him to carry on, winning both civil war and campaigns abroad, and using these victories to glorify iconoclasm in the eyes of soldiers and populace.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> The source situation makes the statement that no other showed less consideration to Italy a very bold statement indeed.

<sup>63</sup> Undoubtedly that *was* an effect of his reign, but far from the only.

Rather than seeing in this an attempt on the part of Ostrogorsky to fool us, it is to some extent a viewpoint he 'counts back' to, as it fits well into the greater scheme with reforms in the 7th century, and golden age in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. The personal dislike he sometimes shows Constantine is, rather like Gibbons, rooted in his unquestioning acceptance of the reports on the cruel measures taken against iconodules, and like Gibbon he sees Constantine as a *religious* fanatic. Like Gibbon his treatment of Constantines reign, though infinitely more detailed and reflected, also seem relatively sloppy, his real passion (unlike Bury, if one dare use the word passion in connection with Bury), lies in other eras.

I already in a few comments anticipated that this overall picture might be in for some criticism. In the next chapter we shall see how it has, indeed, become heavily challenged on nearly every count.

## 7 Brubaker and Haldon, revisionism and skepticism

### 7.1 New light on the dark ages

With my last author(s) my object of study becomes practically contemporary, and indeed it was this book: *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850* (hereafter *Era*) (Brubaker and Haldon 2013) that inspired me to choose the subject of this dissertation. It is somewhat peculiar in being an integrated joint effort of two scholars, and in putting less stress on biographical details of each, I don't intend to postulate total lack of bias in modern writers. Rather it is because I take seriously the authors' claim that:

[A]lthough readers will undoubtedly wish to associate certain themes and topics with a certain author, we have read, amended and interpolated ideas into each other's words throughout. Our aim was to integrate our ideas for each area we have addressed, and in particular to harmonise the very different sources, as well as the subjects they inform, as seamlessly as possible in a single interpretative effort (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 7).

It seems like their efforts are crowned with considerable success, as usually I am not able to discern the one voice from the other. Still there is a common contextual background which arguably *must* produce a bias, and I shall be on the lookout for such, though I realize that I will be more likely to share in some of them myself, not being very remote myself in time or confessional background.

However, if we are to take seriously any claims of 'progressing' in the science (or art) of history writing, by learning that we are susceptible ourselves to be biased should make it possible to avoid some of what might be called the coarser variants. Generally, post modernism and cultural relativism have made their bid since Ostrogorsky wrote, and a (however reserved) respect for religious beliefs (at least in their context) and a less compelling need to interpret them in the light of a preconceived 'grand narrative', ought to make it possible to interpret, amongst others, the conflicts arising from and during iconoclasm in a new light. The downside to this may be that we, in any effort of really understanding (as something qualitatively different from explaining) religious

perceptions and behavior, might be in for increased troubles, as indeed we are personally further removed in time and mentality from the phenomena we are studying.

Leslie Brubaker is Professor of Byzantine Art at the University of Birmingham, John Haldon is professor of History and Hellenic Studies at Princeton University, 'currently' a Senior Research Fellow at the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: not paginated) A quick glance in the literature list of *Era* shows them to represent, and merge, cultural and political expertise and experience, as well as being both quite productive, qualifying both to the appellation Byzantinists. Previously they have co – written “An annotated survey” (Brubaker and Haldon 2003) when they were still both at the University of Birmingham, on the sources for the same period as *Era*, and the latter is thus the result of a collaboration between long time acquaintances as colleagues. Byzantinism in itself is a pointer to the fact that history to a great extent is no longer only scientific, but also highly specialized, professionalized, and departmentalized, and *Era* covering just 170 years clocks in at 799 pages text + more than 100 pages sources and literature, as compared to Ostrogorsky's treating more than 1100 years in just 616, everything included.<sup>64</sup> All this should make it possible to give a fuller, if not necessarily clearer, picture.

The scholarly literature on Byzantium has increased tremendously, many original sources have been translated, some improved upon earlier translations, and new documentary evidence has been discovered or made more easily available. However the most important increase can be postulated to be in the 'material culture', which consists both in artifacts in private or public collections, as well as a richer archaeological record, however ancillary byzantine studies (and thereby archaeology) still might be compared to antique Hellenic and Roman history. From the theoretical viewpoint new perspectives have increasingly become recognized and present, and new ways of interpreting sources have emerged, the most radical assigning aspects as material culture to written sources themselves.<sup>65</sup>

It is now (and indeed has been for some time) possible to build a whole career on (aspects of) Byzantine history alone, even if Byzantinists are still to some extent to be

---

<sup>64</sup> I barely dare contemplate how much space a scope as Gibbon's would have translated into. And I have ca 100 pages at my disposal...

<sup>65</sup> Of course partly 'balanced' by attempts to see material culture itself as 'text'.

seen as occupying a niche in antique and medieval studies, and these latter as a whole might have lost ground (as far as this is possible to estimate in percentages) to historical studies taken as a whole. This specialization and seemingly obsessive care for details can unkindly be seen as a kind of inbreeding, but in that case we (and in this ‘we’ I identify with Byzantinists) can hope that healthy offspring can help to overcome the less fortunate consequences of a, by now, quite old love affair. Sometimes old misunderstandings have been magnified instead of eradicated.

The declared aim of *Era* is not to reform history as such, or justify the discipline itself, rather it is to clean up a little: “We hope that, if we have achieved nothing else, we can say convincingly that the iconophile version of the history of eight- and ninth-century Byzantium has finally been laid to rest” (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 799).

We have seen (through the example of Constantine) how new approaches to Byzantine history only partially have sought to challenge old established ‘facts’ (like the harshness of Constantine’s measures), rather these have been postulated as ‘justified’ or not, on the background of one’s own conception of ‘History’. As the growing amount of, and focus on, material culture have undoubtedly led to advances in our understanding, they (together with quite a lot of written documents) rely heavily upon interpretations on the existing chronological framework for their dating, and thereby for their meaning.<sup>66</sup> A new find will, therefore, sometimes be bound to reinforce an old conception rather than challenge this, because the old idea is the one dictating the use it is possible to put it to. To fully take advantage of new finds it is therefore sometimes necessary to break up much of the foundations and (in as far history is seen as a puzzle) attempt to lay most of the puzzle anew. That might be compared to a change of paradigm. This is not easily done, and at least in this case it might largely be the increased archaeological evidence, with archaeology’s concept of an absolute chronology, which has helped showing accepted truths to be very difficult to reconcile with the new evidence. That in itself encourages a more critical approach to the narrative (and other written sources), the more so as everybody from Gibbon has agreed that they, in the case of iconoclasm range from heavily to extremely biased. At the same time some very dedicated philologists have

---

<sup>66</sup> Here archeology in the narrow sense has an advantage, as it can often infer a lot from the primary context which other material culture often is so far removed from.



spent their careers analyzing and comparing the written sources, narrative and documentary, in the process challenging assumptions about time of composition of different parts of the same document, one imminent example being Paul Speck, very present in the notes to *Era*.

Though history still has to fight for economic founding, it is less necessary in normal history writing to defend the study as such, and inbreeds as we might be Byzantinists no longer feel as strong an urge as of old to highlight Byzantium's historical mission. It's partly in light of this that I am taking less care in identifying the authors of *Era*'s biases in the personal sense, and indeed feel optimism when it comes to bringing new, and sharper light, on that part of Byzantium's dark ages which have been seen to be dominated by iconoclasm and Constantine's perceived role. I hope that will not show me to be uncritical of my contemporary writers, rather I shall strive to remember that sharper light throws other shadows. However that may be, it is about time to be more specific as to what this new light might consist of.

## **7.2 Iconoclasm or iconomachy?**

Right away in *Era* it is declared that the imperial policy in question, and by extension the title of the book itself, is inaccurate, as "the Byzantines called it iconomachy – the struggle about images – which is a more appropriate term for what actually happened" (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 2). However, they go with the conventional label, though having thus implied that the picture of iconoclasm as a destructive (and violent) movement will be challenged. The period coincident with iconoclasm, here set to 717 – 842<sup>67</sup>, is defined as a momentous period in which the Late Roman world's "social, political, economic, and ideological forms" turned into medieval/Byzantine structures, though agreeing with Ostrogorsky that the century before was "equally momentous transformations [with] the rise of Islam, the loss of the eastern provinces [and] the loss of the Balkans [...] redrew the map of the eastern Mediterranean region" (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 2). We shouldn't be misled to assume consensus, though, as the 7<sup>th</sup> century

---

<sup>67</sup> Apparently not entirely coincident with the iconoclast era 680 to 850 itself, but rather delimited by reigns.

changes here are presented as external, whereas the changes of the 8th are internal.<sup>68</sup> To me it seems sensible to assume the regeneration to have happened, not during but after, the period of the heaviest blows.

It is important for Brubaker and Haldon to not only stress the paramount importance of the latter period (where I believe they now advocate the view of the majority), but what is at least still a minority view that the defining feature of the period was *not* iconoclasm, and their declared wish is to see iconoclasm itself as just another aspect of the times, thereby giving potentially neglected other phenomena a chance of themselves becoming part of the context *for* iconoclasm. This is reflected by the choice to have the chapter on iconoclasm (as such) last, with somewhat more than the first half of the book being a detailed (mostly) narrative and chronological rendering of the period, with more thematic chapters on socioeconomic, cultural and organizational topics making up the rest.

At the very beginning they feel the need to dissociate themselves from ‘traditional’ Marxist dogma:

Beliefs are never a mere ‘reflection’ of social conditions. Instead, as people attempted to match their assumptions about how the world was changing, the narrative of social existence – the taken-for-granted social rules governing people’s behavior in the various social structures they inhabited – were altered and eventually transformed. Such narratives are embedded at various levels in written texts, [...] What the written sources give us, in consequence, is twofold: descriptions of social practice and beliefs as particular observers believed they saw them, and also sets of implicit theories about the ways human and divine agencies affect the world. The analysis of these assumptions, where they can be located, is fundamental to our efforts to pinpoint underlying causes of changes in patterns of belief and behavior (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 16f).

Whether or not Justinian’s great project was justified or in some ways beneficial, its gradual collapse (which was apparent to ‘paladine’ as well as common classes) meant an undermining of imperial authority and a search for causes for the disasters which

---

<sup>68</sup> That is not to say that the Heraclian dynasty’s societal structures were static, and neither was the world surrounding the Isaurian dynasty. A point about the latter is that it at least gave as good as it got. As always it is difficult to identify a clear break, and Ostrogorsky’s solution with picking a revolution is not copied, though the political turmoil round the end of the Heraclian dynast has tempted at least some to stress it’s importance. Thus (Treadgold 1997: 337).

befell the empire from the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The seeming miracle of Heraclius' victory in the Persian wars, only to have it all undone in a few years, will only have served to make the break down seem the more dramatic. The loss of prestige was twofold, on the one hand the prestige of the empire itself outwardly, on the other the government and, if no scapegoats were accepted, the person of the emperor(s). A parallel was readily available in Old Testament scriptures, where God repeatedly punished his chosen people for their sins. It is fundamental for our understanding of the conceptions of the period that we accept that it was legitimate to ask for a divine cause underlying any observable phenomenon. Of course more mundane relations of cause and effect were also accepted, and the 'problem' was to find out exactly what sins, committed by who, were responsible for which disasters. So even in secular causation, God could always be found to be the first cause. This search for the divine underlying causes is readily apparent in the literary sources of the period (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 18-21).

In this way a framework is constructed in which we can explain to us irrational behavior and assumptions as, in their own context, rational and in a pragmatic sense legitimate. Simply put; just because rulers could take their cue from a volcanic eruption they are not necessarily stupid, however different our explanation of the causes for the eruption might be. It seems, however, pertinent to ask how consistently we are able to actually apply and carry through such a tolerant and objective view on what still is to us superstition.

For just as we have this underscoring of the importance of the question of causation and other theological questions, seeing that "Emperors, soldiers, clerics and lay persons all had a vested interest in their solution" (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 18), so we have the notion that the importance of iconoclasm has been blown out of proportion. To a large extent it is possible to present a very good case in support of that question.

### **7.3 Culmination during the reign of Constantine V**

During an extensive critical evaluation of the mostly later sources, and contemporary (if only tentatively dated) documental and material evidence, the supposed inauguration of imperial iconoclasm under Leo III is thoroughly challenged. I can go no deeper into that evaluation but summarizing that mostly the traditional view on Leo as ardent iconoclast,

and seriousness of the internal and external conflicts it supposedly gave rise to, is refuted on the basis of seemingly total lack of contemporary evidence. What reasonably can be concluded from the sources is: *That* the volcanic eruption in 726 indeed was interpreted as sign of divine displeasure with idolatrous practices, and hence the practice of ‘proskynesis’ (public prostration) in front of holy images was indeed condemned, though the form this condemnation took is unclear, there seem to have been no edicts involved. As the preface to Ekloga shows Leo (and Constantine) as consciously influenced by Old Testament modes of reasoning, the parallels to God punishing the chosen people for idolatrous practices seem plausible enough.<sup>69</sup> *That* there about the same time was an ongoing, but somewhat limited, debate in ecclesiastical circles concerning the same, or closely related, issues. The patriarch Germanos was actively involved against these, but took pains to tone down the whole issue. *That* in 730 further imperial action was taken against holy pictures, possible to assure their removal from exposed positions where they might too easily invite the wrong sort of affection. *That* probably a papal synod in Rome in 731 was connected with imperial policy on holy images and *That* the issue later, and contrary to Germanos’ best efforts, spread throughout the empire before, or sometimes after his abdication in 730 (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 121-23).

Though the traditional dates for the official start of iconoclasm seem to hold good, it is less easy to judge how devoted an iconoclast Leo was, and in which ways his support, or tolerance, of the iconoclast position was. The only clear statement which it seems possible to make is that the later accounts, both to target and measures, have been wildly exaggerated, as well as the tendency to read iconoclast issues into every domestic and foreign conflict. These might as well be seen as the result of enforcement of his otherwise strict policies (especially fiscal) aiming at better control of the empire and its remaining resources. Though a superstitious motive is admitted, more pragmatic reasons are seen to at least interplay, as in this observation of changes and innovations made about imperial (including designated heir) portraiture on coins:

---

<sup>69</sup> Other places in *Era* it is, as mentioned above, declared that disasters in general could be interpreted as effects of a wrong policy. It is in this place not specifically reflected on *why* this particular disaster was seen as punishment for exactly *this* ‘sin’. As I stated in 2.4 there was rarely a dearth of ‘signs’, and the signs should therefore not be seen as the underlying cause, but only as an amplifier, where it is seized upon as proof of already conceived ideas.

The re-introduction of this type is nonetheless interesting given the attention subsequently paid to portrayals of Christ, since it suggests that already in 720 the emperor may have been thinking about portraiture in novel ways. It also points to what appears to be a desire to promote dynastic succession, and in a very visual way. We may conclude that Leo understood the power of images, and was happy to harness that energy to his own ends (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 146-7).

I postulate that it is to some extent a problem for *Era* to come to grips with the exact relationship between zeal and pragmatism in Leo's mind, and that the sourcal situation which underlies this also makes it extremely difficult to get a clear picture of iconoclast measures, inside as well as outside the ecclesiastical establishment. Maybe surprisingly it is easier to glimpse the 'theory' of early iconoclasm, where the true images of Christ were considered to be the eucharist, the pious Christian and, maybe most telling, the cross.

In considering the cross the interwoven (as postulated) practical and the ideological strains of iconoclasm are perhaps best brought together. "[The iconoclast movement] was initially concerned with emphasizing and giving prominence to the cross as a symbol of imperial authority and divine support" (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 135). It is easy to draw lines back to (at least the then accepted version of) Constantine the 1st's victory at the Milvian Bridge, the same Constantine who made Constantinople the second, and Christian, Rome. The symbol that could represent Christ could at the same time be a reminder of the unbroken line back to (at the least) the founder of the Christian empire, and in so doing cast glory on the very name of Constantine.

However conscious a factor that was for Leo in choosing (or applauding the choice of) the cross, and in naming his son Constantine, or conversely how much under the spell of Christianity he was in making his mundane choices, can be endlessly debated. But even if Leo indeed only countenanced the ongoing debate over icons that might have been largely restricted to the church hierarchy, that would only result in the more 'blame' being laid at the door of Constantine.

The chapter heading "Constantine V and the institutionalization of iconoclasm" (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 156-247), sums up pretty well what, in the perspective employed in *Era*, happened to iconoclasm in his reign, even if it somewhat obscures the attempt to relegate iconoclasm to a secondary place among the influences on, and results

of, imperial politics. Thus the same method of stripping the literary sources of layers of embroidering and interpolations enables the authors to present the iconoclasm of Constantine during the first 10 years of his reign as just as elusive and unobtrusive a phenomenon as his fathers. Likewise the turning point (if such it is) is identified with a natural disaster interpreted as divine displeasure, in this instance the outbreak of the bubonic plague (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 177- 187).<sup>70</sup>

It appears to be indisputable that Constantine, between the plague and the council of Hieria,<sup>71</sup> which lasted from 10<sup>th</sup> of February to 8<sup>th</sup> of August 754 took an active public and personal stance on iconoclasm, as witnessed by his 2 (surviving, out of a speculated original 13) *peusis*, possibly reflecting prepared arguments to be presented at meetings designed to win over iconophile opposition, or maybe just convince people in general. The *Horos* (refutations of iconoclast views) of the 7<sup>th</sup> ecumenical council at Nicaea in 787 also preserves viewpoints directly attributable to Constantine himself (Brubaker and Haldon 2001: 254f).<sup>72</sup>

More importantly (in our context) than casting light on the arguments of the 1<sup>st</sup> iconoclasm, it shows Constantine to be deeply, and personally, involved in the theology of iconoclasm. It is possible (and quite easy, even though compared to however impressive a volcanic eruption a bout of bubonic plague is quite a more important affair) to doubt that the plague, for the first time, convinced Constantine that divine displeasure was visited on his subjects for their idolatrous practices. It is harder to dispute his personal conviction when in full blossom, even if (and in my opinion it must remain an

---

<sup>70</sup> It may be worth noting that another author, who accepts the traditional view on Leo III's strong iconoclast activities, as well as the animosity of Constantine V towards the cult of saints and relics which we shortly shall see challenged by *Era*, shares this view. He might be more inclined to see Constantine as secretly more sympathetic to iconoclasm, and the waiting 10 years as a sign of prudence (Gero 1977: 9-24). This is a good example how *Era* is not really radical in its interpretation of specific issues related the iconoclast era, rather it is the attempt to thoroughly question the whole picture, all the traditionally accepted facts simultaneously, that seem daring. At least it doesn't necessitate speculations that the public religious images had somehow been allowed to reappear between 741 and 75

<sup>71</sup> Hieria was an Imperial palace situated on the other side of the Bosphorus, opposite Constantinople.

<sup>72</sup> There seem to be a general, and rare, agreement that these indeed allows us to approach the stance of Constantine, even though they are reported by his (posthumous) opponents. [*Era* on *peusis* is practically a copy paste from the 2001 book on the sources, but I don't think that warrants a comment?]

if) this only happened after the plague.<sup>73</sup> The contrast to Bury's calculating rationalist is here quite clear.

The emperor seem to have been in a position to heavily influence the council, as the patriarch of Constantinople, Anastasius, died shortly before, but might have participated in the preparations, and none of the other eastern patriarchs were present, nor were representatives from the pope. Indeed the lack not only of papal representatives, but for lack of mentioning at all of the council or even iconoclasm in contemporary Italian sources like the *Life* of Stephen II (752-7) is a strong indication that the issue was not considered as important at the time as it was 30 years after, even if the pope was busily occupied with wooing the Franks for effective military support against the Lombards. Though the overwhelming majority of the 338 bishops reported present thus were undoubtedly from the Constantinopolitan patriarchate, the council considered itself to be ecumenical, and just might have been accepted as such by the eastern patriarchates, if only for a short time (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 190- 192).

The acts are known from the *Horos* (definitions) read out for refutation at Nicaea in 787, and differs slightly from Constantine's *Peuseis*, mainly in being more cautiously formulated. Apart from emphasis on the eucharist, Holy Spirit, the Trinity, and the Cross (on the more abstract level), more specifically it shows:

the rejection of sources of spiritual authority outside the church, its buildings and appurtenances, especially the altar, and thus a rejection of the spiritual worth of images; an emphasis on the clergy, authorized through their ordination to be the only authoritative intermediaries between the sacred and humankind, able to pronounce the prayers which translated the commonplace into the sacred (something which images were incapable of); an emphasis on the spoken or chanted word – led by the clergy but in which all could participate, and an emphasis on the saints as intercessors, reached through prayer rather than through empathetic mechanisms such as relics or imagery. All these points can be illustrated from a variety of sources apart from the text of the *Horos* of 754 (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 193f).

---

<sup>73</sup> Harder, but not impossible, of course. Thus Treadgold, after no clear explanation that Constantine's motives were if not rationalist, then at least irreligious, notes that: "Yet Leo III was by no means irreligious, and not even Constantine V wanted to be thought so" (Treadgold 1997: 391). To him (himself of quite rationalist if not positivist bend) it is so obvious that Constantine's religion was a facade that an argument to that effect is superfluous.

I'm allowing myself to stray a little into this (interpretation of) the contents of iconoclasm itself, which is immediately followed by 2 pages of direct extracts of the most telling *Horos*, as it shows how emphasis is laid on the church (and state) apparatus on controlling the sacred by monopolising access to it, as it shows clear differences to the ideas of the later reformation (even if some overlaps occur), and because it shows which 'mandate' official iconoclasm gave Constantine; a mandate which the traditional account of iconoclasm would show him to overstep. It also clearly indicates a reason, which has nothing to do with pictures, why (some) monks would find cause to dislike the religious policies of Constantine, as they clearly to a large extent were left out of the loop. It also shows that much more than pictures were at stake. The *Horos* have in no way been recently rediscovered, indeed also Ostrogorsky was intimately familiar with them, and the different version of iconoclasm they seem to advocate, making him conclude that: "In his radicalism the emperor went far beyond the decrees of the council of 754 and even openly disagreed with them. He rejected the holy icons and relics and forbade [sic] the cult of saints and the Mother of God" (Ostrogorsky 1968: 175).

Again *Era* sets out to argue, from the lack of contemporary evidence, that this is a later iconophile fiction. Even the unquestionable persecution of (some) monks is quite probably to be connected with 'political' crimes, where the criticism of Constantine is seen as treasonable, attacking his orthodoxy and right to rule. The few specific cases of persecution of named monks, 6 in number, can all be argued to fit into this. Apart from that the accusations are very general giving no verifiable details. It is indisputable that monasticism as such was not eradicated in the empire in the period of persecution, which lasted from 765/6 to 772/3, and some monks and monasteries were even favoured by Constantine. In sum:

Constantine's measures – which – as we have seen, lasted barely seven years in all, and appear to have affected Constantinople and the western districts of Asia Minor the most – seem to reflect a particular decision taken at a specific moment, rather than any general or casual hostility to monks (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 241).

Probably no account even faintly touching on the first iconoclasm can avoid mentioning the case of Michael Lachanodracon. A general of the Thracian division



(more commonly known as ‘strategos’ of the Trachesion ‘theme’, the revisionist – though probably quite generally accepted – standpoint expressed in *Era* is that these two terms have little meaning in the 8<sup>th</sup> century), he is infamous as an even more radical iconoclast than Constantine, famously forcing monks and nuns to marry. He is reported to indeed having eradicated monasticism in the area of his command, and ingratiated himself with the emperor by sending him the proceeds from the sale of monastic property.

Lachanodracon represents a particular problem, as he continued in senior imperial service even after the restoration of 787, which raises some questions. Even though his extreme activities seem not to be attested earlier than in Theophanes, his extremism is accepted: “[R]eferences to lachanodrachon’s persecution make it clear that he was especially zealous in this respect” (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 243 and note 369).

It is to me somewhat surprising that his case isn’t made even more problematic than it is. Crucially some might have asked how Theophanes ascertained the total success of his measures, but maybe the explanation is that he is convenient for all. Either he is an example on exactly how ‘bad’ the iconoclasts could be, or conversely he can be used as a kind of scapegoat or at least lightning rod, in an (explicit or implicit) argument that a few rotten apples gave rise to exaggerations about iconoclasts in general. In *era* he can even exemplify how the most zealous at the bottom were pragmatic, more of that later. I argue that his example is important, and it seems reasonable that there’s some reason (apart from him being a successful general) why his name has been preserved for posterity. And he reminds us that no *one* iconoclast can be representative of the whole lot.

To return to the narrower question of icons it is made good that, as in the reign of Leo, religious pictures were not as much destroyed as moved to less exposed positions, eventually whitewashed. It is noted that

the *Horos* specifically forbade ill-considered acts of vandalism against ecclesiastical furnishings. Furthermore, the claims of the iconophiles that their enemies set about destroying images rests on very few events, often some considerable time after the synod of 754, and often of dubious authenticity (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 200)

Because the solidity of the charges have some bearing on eventual bias in *Era*, I shall briefly refer to one good example from material culture that forcefully supports the

reassessment how radical iconoclasm was in aim and measures. From Hagia Sophia, still visible in what was then the heart, religiously and politically, of the Byzantine empire, is an example of reworking of a picture, seemingly attested in both Theophanes and Nikephoros, if in slightly differing ways. Basically a figural representation has been, carefully, replaced by a cross by the expedient of replacing part of the pieces in the mosaic. *If* the most reasonable interpretation (and there is always room for doubt) is correct, 3 important facts seem to be clear: The change was made at least 12 years after Hieria, the replacement was made with care and skill, and the occasion seems to be other, for reasons of wear and tear, work which had to be done to this part of the church anyway (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 201-203).

Thus there appears to be a lot of good reasons, not to stop considering Constantine as the most ardent of the iconoclasts, but for realizing that even the culmination during his reign was a very toned down affair compared to later accounts: “Byzantine iconomachy differed radically from its more violent early modern counterparts in England and France, where offending statues were routinely destroyed” (brubaker and Haldon 2011: 203).

#### **7.4 Constantine the reasonable zealot**

Admittedly a lot of space and effort have been used treating a phenomenon which is argued only to have a peripheral impact on the period which takes its name from it. However I believe it has been necessary, both here and in *Era*, as it is imperative to know what we are actually comparing the rest of the events of Constantine’s reign with. To be sure nothing seem to be forgotten in the catalogue of the many achievements during the eventful reign, and of things which were new to me is extensive naval activity in western waters in the 750’s and 760’s (together with his already well-known diplomatic activity towards the franks) somewhat negating that Constantine should entirely have ignored western matters, are of note (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 171). Also that a (slight) debasement of the main coinage was stabilized under Leo III and Constantine V, the latter I admittedly found in the thematic chapter on economy, society and state (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 473).

The list is quite impressive, and the conclusion seems to echo Ostrogorsky's summing up of the situation nearly 100 years before: "[Constantine V] left a regenerated Roman state with strong finances, an army that was proud of its successes, and a church that was, on the face of things, united in its support for the established regime" (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 248). This last reservation on the only seeming success of his religious policy raises the question on how it really was with iconoclasm, seemingly his only real failure. It has been freely admitted that sincere belief was a factor, though this seems occasionally to make Brubaker and Haldon somewhat embarrassed on behalf of Constantine. Surely distractions could, and are invoked to, explain lack of iconoclast measures before the plague, after which he

seems to have decided to take the issue up; and even then there is no evidence to suggest that it became the dominant issue in his concerns: the repopulation of Constantinople and the areas most affected by the plague, the rebuilding of the city, and the economic stability of the state seem to have occupied his attention to at least the same degree, if not more so (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 189).

It is also possible to read secular motives into his, parallel rather than derivative, measures against monasticism:

But other reasons have been suggested as playing a more important initial role.<sup>74</sup> In the first place, the danger of men in particular being attracted away from productive labour in agriculture and hence becoming a threat to the fiscal base of the state or from possible recruitment into the army may both have influenced imperial policy (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 243).

Furthermore iconoclasm is seen as functioning also as a form of power politics, on the basis that the large majority of the population seem not to have had strong personal conviction, but quite easily changed their opinions whenever the government did. Of course the whole issue of imperial involvement in church matters and theology can fit into traditional issues about caesaropapism, and thereby the discussion about the

---

<sup>74</sup> We saw in the chapter on Bury how that is the view he advocates. There is no need, however, to see the sincere religion, and the rationalist explanation as necessarily excluding each other. It is perfectly possible, for a pietist, if he perceives that some monasteries are lax and in effect a refuge for skulkers, to decide that *these* particular monasteries should be closed, and the people and buildings put to secular use, without need of compromising deeply held belief.

delimitation between secular and ecclesiastical competence and authority. In this last case it can hardly, on the part of the caesaropapist, be postulated to be a result of pragmatism, and that might indicate a way to understand how secular and religious reasoning interacts. In the specific case of iconoclasm it rather is about showing loyalty to imperial dynasty and politics: “As perhaps with most of the government and court, iconoclasm was a convenient vehicle for the public expression of that loyalty” (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 649).

The caricature of this view would be to compare it to showing submission by wearing a silly hat in public. Not contradictory, but rather complementary and primary to that, the whole nature of the debate might suggest a clue to resolving the problem. Tentatively it can be postulated that actual worship was connected with feelings, whereas the rationalisation, and philosophical/theological justification of this practice involved more intellectual faculties. That the distinctions easily could get blurred is thus observed: “[T]he moment one moves out of the realm of learned theological treatises, the properties of the sacred portrait so carefully distinguished by Nikephoros [The historian and later patriarch] collapse” (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 785). In *Era* the argument moves on to demonstrate a kind of complementarity in the concepts of even the most convinced iconodules, where the theoretical limitations on image worship have little influence on the practice, outwardly it takes the same form (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 785f).

But for most, even learned, the distinctions in themselves can have been blurry enough, and if not even the ringleaders managed to hold up a perfect and consequent example, in practise it might not have been that difficult to let one’s self convince when official policy, as formulated by the experts or professionals, shifted. That is in my opinion, however, not exactly what is expressed here:

While we would not dismiss any religious motivations and ideals which may have been held by individuals and by groups, we would emphasise that deeply held faith, piety, and pragmatism are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Brubaker and Haldon 2011:662).

Thought this might very well be accurate, the key phrase here seems to be ‘not necessarily’, it resolves nothing about what happens if they indeed are perceived by the specific religious mind as mutually exclusive. Finally, the bible being quite contradictory,

it is nearly always possible to find places in scripture fulfilling every need, here I'm thinking about giving to God what is God's, and to the Emperor what is the Emperor's.

This is partly the result by an earlier paragraph, which to me do seem a little confused in its precise meaning:

There remains no really convincing evidence, therefore, that there was any particular group explicitly opposed to imperial iconoclasm until the months preceding [the Nicaea] gathering of 787, although there is every reason to think that there were a number of committed iconoclasts among the higher clergy. [...] Iconoclasm was and remained throughout its history an entirely imperial phenomenon, therefore, with few roots in popular opinion [...] Yet as long it remained the official policy of the government and of the Emperors chosen by God, it retained the loyalty of the great majority of the empire's subjects (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 657).

My problem with this is solely that we saw earlier (in 7.3) that disputes between ecclesiastics was a contributing factor for the beginning of imperial iconoclasm, and one can ask how many 'committed iconoclasts in the higher clergy' it took for it no longer to be considered a 'entirely' imperial phenomenon?

The more idealist view is in contrast brought out by mentioning that, supposedly originally iconoclast hagiography paints a picture of iconoclast saints as more concerned about wider society, and fulfilling a role in this than iconophile saints, and conversely less focused on just saving their own souls. It is even possible to glimpse the contours of a kind of reform monasticism:

In the context of what can be gleaned about iconoclast theology, with its concentration on the idea of the holy and the sacred being meditated through the clergy and through the church, it seems not improbable that the persecution of certain monks and monastic groups, together with some churchmen and lay persons, represents in fact an attempt to eradicate a direct challenge to this set of ideas (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 244f).

Here I must pause to observe that it seems very difficult indeed to contain the idea or concept of iconoclasm to issues specifically connected with pictorial representation, as this is a case where iconoclast theology, despite the best efforts, spills over into whatever measures that were taken against however specific monks and monasteries, and thus, here

iconoclasm again appears to be a whole ‘package’ of ecclesiastical policies. In a note it is also stressed that Constantine in general seem to have been concerned about countering any kind of superstition he encountered (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 238 note 342).

But this picture of him (partially) being a puritan is, as postulated by me, quite revisionist. It remains to be explained how the traditional account arose. Brubaker and Haldon identifies the starting point of the myth to be the council of Nicaea in 787. In Byzantium it was important to have tradition on one’s side, and much of the debate about icons, when not concerned with logic or theology, is about showing how icons had always been venerated, or conversely, how the practice was new and innovatory. It is less important whether the main motives for ‘inventing’ the cult of icons were political or religious, in either case the need was to show that it had existed long before iconoclasm (Brubaker and Haldon 2011:787-790).

This construction was not a deliberate lie as such, and pragmatism as such has little relevance for the understanding of this:

It is less the fact that iconophiles tampered with ‘the facts, or that they deliberately manipulated ‘the truth’, than that they made sense of what they knew, or believed, must have happened, through the prism of their own commonsense assumptions about the past and about the values and morality of their culture (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 798).

How an ‘imprecision’ of this magnitude could arise, is if not explained, then at least made probable, when we remember that the period in question is also the age of the Donation of Constantine.

Though *Era* most of the time manage to keep some emotional distance to the objects of its investigations, I find that they occasionally betray a certain sympathy for Constantine. But for the extensive iconophile propaganda against him “Constantine V would now be celebrated alongside Basil I as the restorer of Constantinople after the so-called dark ages (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 215). Ironically then, iconoclasm as his one big failure (and the one aspect which was largely allowed to define him in the eyes of most later historiography) was partly a failure because of his otherwise successful reign:

[I]t also derived from the difficulty of sustaining a purity which excluded people from easy access to the sacred, rather than one which legitimized it. The military and organizational successes of Constantine V themselves made his version of that purification less essential (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 787).

To top it all, in his insistence on iconoclasm he even had the truth on his side: “The iconoclast argument was precisely (and correctly) that the practice of honouring sacred images was an innovation and as such a deviation (Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 798).

To me, and maybe to the authors of *Era*, there is something decidedly Roman in his staunchness (and even stubbornness) of remedying the evils affecting the state, and insisting on the traditional moral values. His one mistake was to stand in the way of progress, however haphazard that progress might have been achieved by the iconodules in a postulated political manoeuvre by the last representatives of his dynasty (family). In accordance with the view in *Era* that it took the 8<sup>th</sup> century to realize that the roman state had turned into the Byzantium (and by the way that was never *consciously* acknowledged by the Byzantines themselves), his misfortune maybe was to be a ‘Roman’ emperor after the Roman Empire had, if not passed away, then transformed itself to fit new circumstances.

In *Era* most traces of personal cruelty and (excessive) use of brute force have passed away, and even if I don’t find the attempt to reconcile the religious personal conviction with the purely worldly aspects of his policies, iconoclasm is interpreted as rational aspects of his policies at large. It is allowed to detract from our assessment neither in moral, nor in pragmatic matters. Constantine even had truth and rationality on his side, but history is always on the side of the winners. After all it is they who write history.

Only now we are so far away in time, and (in contrast to Ostrogorsky) specific cultural background, that we can reassess the judgment of history. Not that much is, explicitly or implicitly, at stake when it comes to iconoclasm, and therefore it is possible to cast, and I argue that here it has been done, Constantine V in the role of the tragic hero.

## **8 Discussion and conclusion**

We began with a narrowing down of the complex of problems encountered by me in my interest for Constantine the V, and formulated one precise question:

How has Constantine the V's iconoclasm influenced successive generations of historians' view on the man and his reign taken as a whole?

A secondary and more vaguely formulated question, secondary in the sense that I didn't set out to really answer it, was about how religious beliefs influence historical actors and historians alike, conscious and unconscious alike.. But in a sense it is the more fundamental, and very difficult question, and as it has some bearing on the answer of the first, I promised to keep it in mind. Finally I promised to give my own account of Constantine, but this far I have merely been pointing my finger at others when I thought they got it wrong.

I believe to have given 5 specific answers to the main question, hastily summed up in the conclusion to each of my 5 analyses of the 'pictures' of Constantine. However, I should in this discussion leading up to the conclusion try to integrate the 5, and to a larger degree compare them to each other, in an effort to get one larger picture. The second question will again be kept in mind during that discussion, and is somewhat determining the topics, or categories I choose to employ in that analysis. Thus I should be better able to answer my main question in a more general way.

Before that final answer I will present my own brief sketch of Constantine.

### **8.1 The continuum between science/rationalism and religion**

It is important to remember how historiography evolved during the 1200 years spanning this dissertation and to equally be aware that it did not evolve in spite of, but in close connection with, Christian religion. While we cannot accept Bury's essentialist opinion that the 'same' rational spirit underlay byzantine iconoclasm and the reformation, some parallels are apparent and it cannot be discarded out of hand that there indeed are some commonalities.



Firstly the Byzantine iconoclasm was never forgotten, but I can only speculate that it (as presented in iconodule version) *might* have been a kind of inspiration for the Protestants, either as partly an impetus, or for some of the content matter. Also, assumed common roots in the Paulican heresy, through intermediary stages, are sometimes speculated to have been a factor. Be that as it may, what matters to us here is that no external influence needs to be assumed to be a necessary cause for iconoclasm. I will postulate that Christianity in itself, in its textual tradition and its dogmas, carries all the ingredients needed for iconoclasm, and indeed the secularization which has taken place from the beginning of modern times. That is not to say that it had to happen as it did, in the sense that Christianity all along the way has been interacting with other sets of ideas and physical conditions outside the control of *any* human conceptions, except to the extent that we can and do assign them different places in our theorizing. A case in point is the plague of 746 which Constantine *might* have interpreted as a clear sign of divine displeasure, that theory is (though the plague itself now is assigned a natural cause) used in *Era* to explain why Constantine suddenly became (at least a more ardent) iconoclast, while Bury is tempted to theorize about plagues as nature's big cleansers in a quite social Darwinist context. Personally I'm not that keen on ascribing the plague that much importance for Constantine's religious views, even though he had other distractions it seems a long time to wait with the council of Hieria, if it indeed was sparked by the plague. As I also have observed, calamities were practically ubiquitous, and even if they sometimes *did* spark a heresy or a religious reform, it's hard to see them as the main contributors to defining the *content* matter of these. Rather, they were convenient vessels to lend weight to preconceived ideas in an attempt to convince those who hadn't conceived 'their own' ideas yet.

In Christianity's textual tradition, mostly the Old and the New Testament, there are definitely enough contradictory statements, even if the 'reformed' bible is not entirely the same as the catholic or orthodox.<sup>75</sup> Apart from implying that close reading, if one possessed no strong antidote, is almost bound to lead to at least partial scepticism, it is clear that iconoclasm didn't have to find remarks critical to idols from 'outside' Christianity, or even in heretical Christian sects. Clearly Nikephoros and Theophanes had

---

<sup>75</sup> At Constantine's time, and until 1054, Orthodox and catholic were of course co-terminous.

gotten a healthy dose of the vaccine. Anyway it is worth remembering that the two religions which often were 'accused' of inspiring iconoclasm, Judaism and Islam, to a very large extent share the same tradition, at least when it comes to the Old Testament. The otherwise changing context of each of all these religions (which to no mean extent was made up of the others, and heresies within them), could then encourage accentuations of the one and the other. Never the less, Judaism and Christianity are usually seen as closer to each other than each to Islam, or at least they are today.

Now it's hardly controversial to consider Christianity to be a very spiritual religion, Judaism less so, the Old Testament being more materialistic and concerned with this world, and ways to improve ones' lot in it through 'magical' means, by making a (and observing) deals with God. Therefore differences in each 'branch' of Christianity are likely, in interplay with the historical context, to arise from whether emphasis is put on the Old or the New Testament, or maybe both. It is somewhat parallel to whether one emphasises this life, or the next. And in comparing them, if the exegesis isn't extremely thorough and heavily supported by a very strong meta narrative, one is nearly bound to conclude that not all of it is literally true, some of it must be allegorical or symbolical, and not in an absolute sense true. And from accepting that some of it can't be true there's not that big a leap to speculating that maybe none of it is true. But that still happened by stages, and some of these are apparent in our 5 pictures.

The process has set in with Gibbon, and in his (in)famous chapter XV (and XVI) which are quite witty; apart from sharing some of my claims just put forth, he clearly pointed to inconsistencies particularly between the new and the old testament. Basically he was reviewing the early history of the Christian church, and being the historian of the Late Roman Empire he also became a historian of early Christianity, and as we saw he was supported by existing secondary literature for Christianity's first 500 years to help his synthesis on its way. And though the parts and scepticism isn't solely his invention, it is worth giving an example:

It is incumbent on us to adore the mysterious dispensations of Providence, when we discover that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is omitted from the law of Moses; it is darkly insinuated by the prophets, and [even after it was evolved into doctrine in later jewish history] it was still necessary that the doctrine of life and immortality, which had been dictated by nature, approved

by reason, and relieved by superstition, should obtain the sanction of Divine truth from the authority and example of Christ (Gibbon 1909b 23f).

Such as above shows how the reigning religion had itself become the subject of historical study, reflection, and even irony. And it is worth remembering that many early scientists were deeply religious people, and that science (by slow stages) also grew out of the church, not always in a clear break with it. Thus it is well known that Isaac Newton was in fact deeply religious, and there is no contradiction involved in establishing natural laws and seeing them as created and, crucially, *upheld* by God. The only question was under what circumstances, and mostly when, exceptions were allowed, as with the miracles surrounding Christ “when he [the Deity] suspended the laws of Nature for the services of religion” Gibbon 1909b: 30). We are in the lucky position that we *know* for a fact that Bury had read Gibbon, and we have little reason to assume that Bury in any way disagreed with most of Gibbons ridicule of the sillier and more superstitious parts of Christianity. Thus Gibbon is no less important for promoting and popularizing rational views on Christianity than he is in extending the life span of the Roman Empire with several centuries. But it is also a point that the sceptical exercise, partly because Gibbon had perfected it, largely had been done, now it was the more tedious task, not of demonstrating the existence of superstitious weeds, but to get down to work and root them all out, one by one.

But as just stated, Christianity and science were getting along famously in Bury’s Britain. Christianity survived the skeptical onslaught by retrenching in a position which was, so to speak, nearly coterminous with the next world. Most of what smacked in any way of silliness and superstition was discarded, until just about the only supernatural elements left were the baptism and the eucharist. And then of course the existence of God, who was imagined as a watchmaker, the world and the laws of nature being the parts of the watch. That could be construed as an even greater demonstration of the glory of god, and the scientific study itself as a means to acknowledging the wonders of God in all its intricacies, but to make this possible it’s imperative that God doesn’t run around and change the rules. As this form of Christianity is impossible to disprove through science, the belief in it can be held that more firmly, one might say that the only

superstition (Bury wouldn't use that word), is the belief in God itself, and that Bury was just as religious as decency required him to be. An interesting example of how he conceived faith, or irrational belief, is this from his *The Idea of Progress*:

Enough has been said to show that the progress of humanity belongs to the same order of ideas as Providence or personal immortality. It is true or it is false, and like them it cannot be proved either true or false. Belief in it is an act of faith (Bury 1909: 6).

It is very probable that this firm belief in progress is what enables Bury to value Constantine in a very different way than Gibbon, who doesn't seem entirely to have shared the *philosophes'* optimism on behalf of the future of humankind. Apart from the distraction by Rome, a very important reason for Gibbon to detract from the merits of Constantine is the *moral* judgment he made on him, a kind of judgment that Bury explicitly stated wasn't the business of history. History married to this kind of absolute belief in progress takes on some of the same features as determinism, and Constantine, as I said before, becomes a force of nature and no more morally to blame than gravity when it lets a man fall to his death.

The 1<sup>st</sup> world war is rightly seen as one of the great disillusionments of western history, and the years before the 2<sup>d</sup> probably didn't do much to induce Ostrogorsky with optimism in the progress of history. Anyway his religious background, even if he wasn't religious in any strong or conscious sense, was not protestant. If only because he was a 'direct' descendant of one of the nations whose birth was intimately connected with Byzantine history, his nationalism is more apparent than Bury's, and it is worth noting that the mission of history had, at least to a large extent, changed from that of humankind to that of nations. As few emperors stand out against the others when it comes to historical progress in the Marxist sense we need not ascertain whether that was a strong concern for Ostrogorsky, though we saw a tendency to identify revolutions and farmer-soldiers, the last of which might also be demonstrated to show parallels to pan Slavonic ideals in pre, and post, Bolshevik Russia. History of Byzantium could be about nation building, helping to reinforce the common identity that could bind a nation together, even if it wasn't consciously formulated, it was part of a meta narrative about history's mission.

Such 'glue' can be said to have been sorely needed in Yugoslavia, but how much Ostrogorsky's experience in that patchwork state of different faiths and nationalities meant is difficult to say. Rather earlier experience of rulers of an absolutist bent with a liberal amount of armed forces at their disposal, will have been contributing to a kind of 'throwback' to Gibbon, if not to form moral judgments on rulers, then at least not to excuse them in the name of (attempted) historical progress. As so often when we seem to observe the pendulum swing back and forth, we never return to the same just because the once new idea have been proved wrong or had lost most of its 'faithful' adherents, that indeed should be an important point in dialectics, inside as well as outside of history. And still most of us probably carry around an idea that in many ways the new times, on balance, are better than the good old days, of course our childhood excluded.

And at least as modern historians (and maybe even as 'postmodern'), we have some idea of progression in our historical practice, that we are constantly building on the results of earlier historians, and even if some of what we come up with will have to be torn down just as we are tearing down the less sound parts of earlier structures, we have increasingly become aware that history is also an art. It is about constructing meta narratives, or at least narratives, even if the style and emphasis have changed considerably, we get no mean amount of satisfaction from pointing out errors in others' plots. But the willingness (that at least we profess) to be skeptical to even our own foundation as discipline and intellectuals, and the focus on literary aspects of the historical science, have in some respects made it possible to identify more with Gibbon and his situation. And ironically, though any absolute standard for morals is absent, our judgment of earlier human beings has in some way become moral again, even though we concede that earlier people were acting within another context that make it an anachronism to measure them by our standards. On the other hand we have no objective and absolute standard to measure them by.

Just like I did, Brubaker and Haldon seem to smell blood when they perceive that history (with small h) has done Constantine an injustice, in the sense that it is inconsistent with what we seem to perceive to be the importance, or the sum, of his reign. Even if this sum must be relative, and it is not possible for Brubaker and Haldon to formulate the question whether Constantine was a great emperor. And how should we define 'great'?

Still, he seem to be quite important, and we see suggestions of applying to him less dangerous epithets as ‘restorer of Constantinople’, at the more technical level they go a long way to disqualify claims about his cruelty or at least excessive brutality, and though I believe it to be rather successful, I’m not *fully* convinced that it is so. Mostly the argument is rooted in the lack of positive evidence, but not much is possible to ascertain with absolute certainty when it comes to Byzantium in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, as with so much else. Still, there is good reason to suspect especially iconophile sources’ reliability about anything pertaining to Constantine or other whom they perceived as iconoclasts, and at least material culture seem to strongly support the tenet that iconoclasm wasn’t what it has later been made out to be.

But by finally and officially cutting ourselves loose from an acknowledged anchoring in religion or any other kind of metaphysics, religion as such becomes a new kind of problem. Even if we vaguely feel that our own branch of Christianity is somehow better (as it led to ‘us’), we cannot (or should not) unquestioningly prefer one to the exclusion of others, and few today will take the easy way out and just condemn *all* religion as necessarily evil and harmful. Whereas society has a way of dealing with it, as it can judge religious actions as legal or illegal, we observe again and again that people who probably were absolutely convinced in their belief act in a way that we would consider contrary to that belief. Brubaker and Haldon to some extent steer clear of the problem by the observation that faith and pragmatism need not be mutually exclusive, and that indeed they might have joined forces in the case of the iconoclast Emperors. However I observed that it says nothing about when they *are* conflicting, I suspect that the problem here might be the use of the word ‘pragmatism’, as it implies some conscious valuing and prioritizing.

I suggested earlier that feelings and intellect could conflict without the conflict being really conscious, or rather that it could be rationalized into something ‘else’. I will expand a little on that by postulating that ‘post modernism’ is not a theory but a condition. Though some will point to philosophers (or whatever they prefer to be called today), the big systems that were intended to take over religion’s role as suppliers of meaning and truth, have long since faltered. Though we are able to point to inconsistencies and weaknesses in any we cannot come up with an all-embracing and

convincing one of our own. Even science's quest for a TOE (Theory of Everything) would, if successful, come up with an answer so simple and elegant that it by explaining everything in general, would explain nothing in particular. If we do not dispute this, then we cannot, even if we don't consider ourselves post modernists, go back to the modern.

We seem to know that the universe is too complicated to be simply and intelligibly explained, and likewise I dare say that none of us are able to at one time coherently explain, and demonstrate, all our knowledge, ideas and conceptions in a structured and not in the slightest way self-contradictory manner. That leaves room for inconsistencies, and indeed in a religion as Christianity's optics we see how people are weak, and contrary to the best of their intentions sin again and again, as their morals conflict with their instincts, I need only point to the cliché with an angel on one shoulder, and an imp on the other. And it might be any body's guess who wins on each occasion, but even if sin wins there's a good chance that the result will be rationalized into something acceptable to the 'higher', and more well-articulated, parts of one's psychic make up. Hypocrisy is usually only observable by others; with that observation I'm moving into the next part of my discussion.

## **8.2 The continuum between temperament and personal experiences**

Though attempts have been made to identify either biology or milieu as the essential defining factor for the makeup of the personality of human beings, I consider them to be in fact mutual influences each other, but in defining the biases which can arise from personal preferences it can be difficult to isolate them.

As I review my 5 pictures Nikephoro's and Theophane's personalities are largely lost in conceptual distance, though both must have been interested in history (as they perceived it). Of what might have irritated them on the personal level could be Constantine's intruding into the religious sphere, but the enormity of his sins against what they perceived, not only a fraction of, but the church and religion itself, drowns out any personal voices. I will speculate, however, that Nikephoros just *might* have been a little impressed with Constantine's martial career, though it matters little in his general assessment.

Gibbon on the other hand stands out as both prudent, clever and cautious, trying to avoid extremes and therefore condemning both Constantine and his opponents as fanatics, though his caution also leads him to recognize positive aspects of the iconoclast emperors' policies. He is repelled by the reports of cruelty, and seems to have a genuine care for both humans in general and individuals, however much he ridicules practically everybody and everything. He seems not to be on the outlook for the perfect, and it's reasonable to speculate it to be because he didn't expect to find it anywhere. Certainly his choice of subject, a decline, indicates that his general outlook might have been pessimistic. And in such a state of mind it is probably easier to forgive people for their imperfections, because who is perfect, and what is the point?

This contrasts to Bury who doesn't seem often to doubt anything, and always has an opinion to offer, even if it is not (consciously) a moral one. He also seems to be so fond of humanity in general, that he has little sympathy to spare for any particular examples of the species. In this absolute conviction of the correctness of his attitude, he reminds me the most about Nikephoros and Theophanes, he is religiously rational (or at least progressive) and fanatically disinclined against superstition. As observed the rationality of the iconoclasts' policies looks suspiciously like Protestantism, and his undoubted qualities as a historian notwithstanding it is easily conceivable that he, when looking at the iconodules, is thinking about the Irish Catholics. From youth feeling an English aristocrat in a sea of Irish, and early and highly educated, he can have had scant respect for the Irish, stupid and superstitious, ages away from his own enlightened Protestantism, stubbornly resisting the British's magnanimous attempts at civilizing them. Thus he had strong personal reasons for being biased in favour of Constantine, furthered even more by his openly declared utilitarianism, which could only further his contempt for the idol worshippers that *he* personally knew about.

On the other hand there seems to be less utilitarian about Ostrogorsky, and he would have had good reasons to suspect any revolutionary movement using 'fire and sword' in the attempt at making the world a better place to live. And furthermore he knew the idol, not worship but indeed veneration, to be the nice safe sort of religion which, however much as opium for the people, like opium at least gave a sort of wellbeing. Or at least so I'm speculating, I find some justification of it in this his



assessment of Constantine's own contribution to theology: "Constantine V, influenced by occult and oriental conceptions, insisted on the complete identity, even the consubstantiality, of the picture with its prototype" (Ostrogorsky 1968: 171f). This (not rationally defended sympathy for the 'right' interpretation of what happened when one venerated icons, also shows why he must have *felt* compelled to choose side, and the opposite to Bury against this militarist meddling in theological affairs. That it on the face of it coincided with Bury's stance against orientalism (and undoubtedly occultism) was because didn't understand the same by these terms, which is why Constantine ends up on both sides of the divide.

Brubaker and Haldon do not take sides in the theological debate, but in the, also important, Byzantine debate of what was the *traditional* way of handling icons, they disagree with Gibbon and the iconodules when it comes to the start of the veneration of icons. In this, as opposed to theology verifiable, and thereby 'safe' optic, he was right, and as previously said we practically have to feel sorry for him. And their highly professionalized background taken into consideration, it is likely that they have felt that frustration again and again as also modern historians have continued taking serious the words, if not their deeper significance, of the original iconodule historians' slander. And it is in this context I will try to explain why they never use the word fundamentalist in connection with Constantine.<sup>76</sup> It is, I think, not dishonesty, neither might it be a conscious choice, but if that word is used in connection with rehabilitation of Constantine's name in a modern context, it is simply likely to give the wrong impression. And granted he has little in common with North American fundamentalists, just like Protestant iconoclasm has little to do with byzantine ditto, but *politically* they are, I dare speculate that Brubaker and Haldon thinks (and feels), quite odious. I do. They usually appear to be quite stupid too, and I believe that not even the worst enemies of Constantine never called him stupid. And then there's the *Islamic* fundamentalists... Maybe it's wiser to not introduce that word in the debate right now.<sup>77</sup>

### 8.3 The continuum between genre and theory

---

<sup>76</sup> At least I don't remember them doing it, though I haven't reread all 800 pages since I realized this point. They certainly don't do it while talking about Old Testament influences and pietism.

<sup>77</sup> Luckily i don't need to have those qualms, as only 3 people are ever likely to read this dissertation.

Under this heading I want to finally consider how our choice of form and content in itself forces a bias on our object of study, and as in the previous there's really not that much to say about our two primary sources. One important aspect should be observed, though, and that is that their choice of genre, history, forces into the narratives the invaluable information on Constantine's actions apart from the religious ones, and it is exactly the demands of the genre that restrains them from just heaping invective on Constantine, and indeed the other heretical emperors they touch upon. And them not being scientific, history as *genre* seems not intrinsically to be that bad after all.

For Gibbon there's no problem making history into literature, at least he manages to make it look easy. However we see here how the choice of plot in unpredictable ways forces a bias against Constantine. Though the radicalism that he ascribes to Constantine irritates his sensibilities, what was really subtracting from his worth was the futility of his policies, he was working against the current of Gibbon's narrative which is decidedly downwards. Though Gibbon didn't subscribe to a historical theory in the modern sense, he had his grand narrative about how, and why, the Roman Empire was falling. And he might subconsciously have felt what many later observers have pointed out, that (considerably more than) 1000 years is a long time being spent falling, and this is definitely the weakest spot in Gibbon's overall plot. Too much attention on Constantine would only serve to make that deficiency clear, conversely the plot idea in itself makes it more difficult to spot Constantine's retrogressive movements.

Though Bury is undoubtedly an exponent of early scientific history, historical theory is still some way from the breakthrough of Marxist stadium theory, and in as far as he has an overall theory it is quite simply a dualism between oriental and occidental. And there Constantine seems to fit admirably in on the right side. Apart from that he is searching for the laws or rules of history absolutely *everywhere*, in his ceaseless pointing out of recurring themes, here again Constantine fits well by (nearly) being a protestant. I must somewhat excuse Bury, as the state of the science of history in his days still called for many basic tasks to be accomplished, there was not that pressing a need to fit the available historical facts into a theoretical framework, getting a good translation of the sources and attempting to make a clear narrative out of the often contradictory sources *was* of primary importance. Bury's spirited, but failed, attempt of getting all of the

history of Byzantium acknowledged as Roman shows how the battle about the delimitation of the provinces of history was still ongoing, and it should be remarked that the parallel institutionalization and departmentalization of the sciences and history itself partly have determined conceptions about what provinces 'properly' belongs to each 'specialist'.

Ostrogorsky was more inclined to look at what separated Byzantium from Rome, and he had a point. Bury got away with calling the first five centuries of Byzantium Later Roman (though he is incessantly involved in discussing how Antiquity was changing, by stages, into the medieval. But if continued up to 1453, should we then have had the Even Later Roman Empire, the Very Much Later Roman Empire and so on? Better to invent a whole new entity, and start with the quite obvious time of Constantine the Great 'choosing' a new religion, and throwing in a new capital while he was at it. And that Christianity's object was in a sense to convert the Slavs, the achievement of which as demonstrated was considered progress in the eyes of Ostrogorsky. Constantine was standing in the way of that mission, not because Ostrogorsky buys into him being against religion as such, but because the wrong kind of Christianity might not have had such appeal to the Slavs. And as it was the contest with the Roman Church in christening Europe's heathens in the next centuries was sharp enough, and I must grant that Constantine's sterner religious attitude might have appealed less to heathens. Again the 'choice' of grand narrative influences how single elements in this is measured, what kind of attention they receive, and indeed how they are valued.

If Ostrogorsky adhered to stadium theory, it had little bearing on his practical work on Byzantium, although he did stress feudalism, and the breakdown of Heraclius institution of a free peasantry with military obligations as a cause for Byzantium's eventual (political) decline, and this, as it seems today groundless, identification of Heraclius as great reformer somewhat distorted the view of the next two centuries as a whole.

Brubaker and Haldon's narrative on Constantine was postulated by me to be a tragedy, that we covered above as well as the big theoretical question which was so important that it transcended mere theory, their grand narrative was in a way that the grand narrative has been replaced by meta narratives. As I implied, post modernism is not

as much a theory as a symptom, and I understand and respect that they don't want to adhere to it as *theory*. A little like Bury they *are* searching for underlying causes, and some chapters came of that, but Constantine was more often than not a blur in them which I believe to be one of the intended points. It doesn't mean that they don't apply 'small theory', for an example the whole need for veneration of icons is the fact that icons (in contrast to relics) can be produced in abundance, and the whole issue is imbedded in a supply and demand framework that would fit a marketing analysis admirably. This way of applying modern theory to ancient problems leads me to my final considerations.

For theory is not only historical theory, today we have theories for nearly every aspects of life, supporting or constraining our navigation through being, and maybe there is a neat logic to it, that as the big theories are shattered, so we get that many more shards, ready to be picked up. But what if these are not really theories but a kind of modern myths, small strands of dogma disguised as objective truths, serving as new minor superstitions or biases? And not only that, might they not always have been with us? One particular example which holds good at least from Bury is the myth, or theory, of humans as rational agents. One might say that historians shouldn't easily let themselves be convinced by that, having access to so much evidence to the contrary, but that might be my temperament showing through. And anyway I'm bound to share in the effects myself. So all the time when we watch the generations pass by our gaze, we interpret and assume, and we try to supply meaning, but how to guess when results are intended results, and when they are just coincidence and chance? Often great men in history are assigned a strategy which they set out to carry through, but how do we know they didn't make it up as they went along? In the end, and that's what makes hermeneutic history so difficult, we merely assume that people behaved in a reasonable manner if they behaved as we would have done, at least believing ourselves to be rational. We let our concepts about strategy decide whether we agree with Constantine not sending armada upon armada against Rome, notwithstanding that most of us are not strategists and have scant military background. And even if we have special training, our military (or political) doctrine has little meaning removed from our technological and logistical supports. And to make matters even worse, we add hindsight. And all these little bits of theory which

have become so commonplace that we barely notice them, is also what I would call common sense, which makes up a very substantial part of our meta narratives.

In this all the strands of bias I have talked to some length above comes together, as it is the (I postulate unique) mixture in each of us that determines our individual way of seeing the world, in a concoction of what our meta narrative allows us to perceive, and how our own place in the whole (the perspective I might say) let us influence, and ultimately give *our* little imprint, in the ‘perpetual give and take’.

#### **8.4 A biographical sketch of Constantine V and his reign**

I cannot escape the task of myself giving a sketch of Constantine and his reign, if nothing else because I ought to give my reader a chance to get an expression of my biases, it will also serve as a pointer to where I disagree with the historians, which is relevant as it makes clearer where I think they went wrong.

Born in the purple in 718 shortly after his fathers’ coming to power, there is good reason to assume that Constantine received the best education Byzantium could offer, and as we have seen that culture and learning can’t be said to have become entirely extinct, even in the darkest of hours during the preceding century; indeed I have speculated that it might have seen the beginning of a revival during his reign. In Leo III’s reign we have seen him closely associated with the promulgation of Ekloge and participating in a successful military campaign, and there is no clear example extant on him ever breaking radically with his fathers’ policies. If that is correct it points to him being both sophisticated and consciously aware of his duty as the head of the state, a role in which he was deliberately cast from his coronation as co-emperor in 720.

Taking over the reins in 741 he set out on a campaign against the Arabs which might very well be seen as intended to expand of the success at Akroinon in 740, and when faced with the revolt of Artabasdos he managed to find support in other divisions of the army, eventually defeating both Artabasdos and his son in the field. As these are only the first military victories in a long series, we are compelled to assume that he was a general of no mean ability, his defeating a veteran commander as Artabasdos strongly suggests ability, though we have no record of the generalship of the latter. If we are correct in assuming that the traditional view that the soldiers, especially those of

Anatolia, were not particularly iconoclast, some ability to win support, by argument or charisma, must be assumed. For it would have seemed a far from easy task to win back a lost throne against an opponent who had the official apparatus of the capital, and the resources it commanded, at his disposal.

After reasserting his power, he continued warring against the Arabs, now themselves distracted by internal troubles, but soon disaster in the form of the plague struck. Already involved in repopulating parts of the Empire with manpower gained in the eastern war, which in itself points to a realistic view of what could be accomplished against a foe which was still vastly superior in manpower and economic resources, he set about (we might assume shortly after the plague abated), repopulating Constantinople itself, this time with 'native' settlers from the Balkan provinces. All in all it seem that the plague didn't permanently hamper him in following out the foreign policy he set out on at the beginning of his reign.

In this he seems not to have permanently ignored any area of the empire, but he gave priority to the eastern parts (The Balkans and Anatolia) which later went on to become the territorial basis for Byzantium's revival. Indeed the many campaigns against Bulgaria shows an interest in the Balkans that might not have been equaled since the reign of Maurice (582-602). In both of these cases that focus was made possible by the 'solving' of the eastern problem, which no longer posed a mortal threat to the territory, or the very existence, of the Empire, and from strategic considerations the Balkans indeed seems to be the obvious choice. Whereas his formation of the Tagmata usually is interpreted as a way of safeguarding the government against military revolts, I see no reason why an equally important goal could not have been the (re)formation of an elite force in the Emperors presence, especially as Constantine undeniably gave his army (and probably the navy) a lot of attention. Certainly he didn't spare himself the rigors of extensive campaigning, and that the only campaign he ever abandoned on account of health was when he caught his terminal illness, makes it even more difficult for me to accept that he should have been permanently afflicted with any serious illness. And if he was, that would point to an almost superhuman awareness of his duty.

Likewise several motives can have influenced his religious policies, but I don't see any need to count 'pragmatism' among them. His awareness of his duty as head of the

state, as Leos' probably strongly autocratic and even caesaropapist, made it natural for him to care about the piousness of his subjects, in probability also as a duty to God. We see him preparing theological arguments himself, and eventually convening a synod which on the one hand tries to convince the clergy itself, on the other to get the church apparatus support for the measures he deemed necessary for the enforcement of these. There need not indeed be any conflict between what he saw as best for the state and his personal beliefs, but that might easily stem from his religious conviction underlying the way he saw the interests of the state, caring for both was his duty to God. Whether he was to any big degree influenced by portents as the plague is impossible to prove or disprove, in all probability he did share his ages belief in a God who could be moved to punish or reward, though he often seems realistic he was no rationalist in the modern sense. Indeed a strong case could be made that he was not only a pietist, but a fundamentalist as well. Again I will remind my reader of the Old Testament influence on the legislation that he at least countenanced, and the whole thing about idolatry tastes more of Old than New testament. And if the accusations of hostility towards relics and monasticism as such are indeed later inventions (assumed by iconophiles who saw him as being against 'religion'), he can't be postulated as being against traditional beliefs (superstition) as such, some 'magical' ways of seeking gods assistance was recognized, the tendencies in Christianity (and the New Testament) towards pure spiritualism seem not to have been strongly accentuated. And as it seems like the cult of icons was indeed the innovation of the generations before iconoclasm, he might easily have seen himself as the defender of tradition and in no way a religious reformer. Though (or on account of) believing him to be a kind of fundamentalist, I agree with Bury that he was no stranger to the pleasures of this world, if nothing else his three marriages points in that direction, as he had heirs of his 1<sup>st</sup> and 2d marriage, so that 'duty' had been fulfilled already. Finally I want to remind that he showed great (and we might say futile and in no way rational) care for his drowned soldiers and sailors after the shipwrecks which cut short one of his Bulgarian campaigns.

The character of his measures remains to be evaluated, but I don't find support for claiming that he always resolved to force immediately. Indeed we on many occasions saw attempts at convincing before enforcing, but there's no denying that his measures at times

were harsh. Though (or maybe because) the crime might have been political, the mostly agreeing accounts of Nikephoros and Theophanes on his punishment and execution of the patriarch Constantine in 766 is far from pleasant reading, but doesn't prove *personal* cruelty, only the will to use punishments which were indeed cruel and unusual. It is made clear that the punishments were meted out in public in the hippodrome, actually with the active participation of the crowd, amongst the other 'amusements' (Theophanes 1997: 609f **441f**); (Nikephoros 1990: 159 **83f**). I am not inclined to use this public aspect as an argument that the crowd could force this on Constantine against his better wishes (though it does prove that not everybody opposed all of his measures), neither does it prove conclusively that he was wooing the mob, or anything else about his relationship to 'the man on the street'. It shows that he was in no way ashamed of the way he treated his namesake and former patriarch, and indeed he might have felt that duty not only allowed him, but actually required him, to act in that manner. Of course it also acted as a deterrent, anyway it is clear that Constantine, not only as a general, could be brutal when it seemed to be required.

Was he a great Emperor? I have to admit to some doubt whenever I consider bestowing this honour on any person from history, I always ask by which parameters we should judge, as I believe no-one to be free of faults and beyond criticism. I must answer that he might very well have been, had his iconoclasm been victorious, I certainly believe that he has not been treated fairly by history, ironically enough because of his (near) contemporary enemies. Today when we finally question all aspects of their bias, we have stopped handing out medals to former rulers, and indeed mostly use the epithet by convention, if we use it at all. But I'm merely dodging the question here, what do *I* think?

Well, it would require ability, which Constantine had in abundance, but also often extensive conquests or the bestowing on ones subjects a new (beneficial) religion or capital, doing something out of the ordinary which changed the present and the future in radical and 'positive' ways. But all his brilliant exploits aside, I don't believe Constantine ever attempted such. Though he usually stood up to any occasion, and always reacted with vigor (and most often intelligently and effectively), he rather worked with what he had in the way which best served the interests of his state as he perceived them. I have said little about economic reforms, but I find that the word 'reform' is often loosely



applied. That he found money for all his undertakings, which must have been expensive, merely proves that the collection of revenues was efficient, not that radical changes in the structures took place. As medieval historians rarely took great interest in socio – economic developments, we can usually only make a general picture of economic developments over times usually longer than even a long reign as Constantine’s. That I interpret him as focused on tradition do not mean I perceive him as incapable of coming up with new ideas, tradition often leaves several options open, and it is possible to combine elements in a new way too. In that way tradition might have a lot in common with meta narratives. Constantine’s complicated plan of campaign against Bulgaria (sending an amphibious force in their rear) shows some imagination and daring, but it is not a revolution in the art of war. His focus on Bulgaria was new in as far as it was sustained, but the whole peninsula had been considered Roman for centuries. Again, he always *reacted* however vigorously and successfully, and most agree that the Empire’s position (except from the detail about religious unity) was on a sound footing at his death. Indeed it took the early death of his heir, and repeated political and eventually dynastical crises, before the immediate results of his reign was jeopardized.

I probably wouldn’t call him Constantine the Great, but the Byzantine Empire in 741 might indeed not have survived another ‘great’ emperor as Justinian, one with a vision to root out the Islamic ‘heresy’ and conquer all of Italy now that Leo had supplied a breathing space and gotten the finances in order. It probably needed a ruler with a clear sense of what was possible, and the will and ability to carry through the policies he deemed to be necessary, even in the face of strong opposition. And not falling for the temptation to being *that* great, if only because he might not have had it in him, was in a way a sign of a kind of greatness.

## 8.5 Conclusion

My main question has, I believe, already received particular answers during the analysis of my 5 pictures and in the discussion in this chapter. A *general* answer is that iconoclasm only for Nikephoros and Theophanes, and even then already as a package, was the *one* defining cause for their bias. Moving away from their context, we saw the way historians valued iconoclasm was in itself dependent on other biases, which had

arisen since the primary sources were written down. Sometimes iconoclasm was shaping the other biases or conceptions, but as often other preconceptions shaped how the reports of iconoclasm were interpreted, often it is difficult to say which bias is the defining one, as it indeed turned out to be a whole web of scientific, psychological and commonplace assumptions and ideas.. The salient feature that stands out is that the primary sources were allowed for some 1200 years to shape *not* how Constantine's iconoclasm was perceived, but still what building bricks were available to historians as they reconstructed the importance of Constantine and his reign, most of the time they didn't question the 'package' handed down to them. Notwithstanding that we for at least a couple of hundred years have had the possibility to question, not only the interpretation, but also the contents of, the narrative which was handed down to us; we didn't pause to wonder as long as reinterpretations were enough to serve the needs that our other biases (in the broadest sense) dictated.

So by proxy the primary sources biases against iconoclasm was allowed, not to dictate the interpretation of Constantine, but distort the overall picture of the man and his reign, whether *that* picture was positive, neutral and negative to iconoclasm.

## 9 Literature

As this is a historiographical dissertation, I note eventual dates for first publication in square brackets, at the end of the bibliographic note.

*Academic dictionaries and encyclopedias*. Last accessed 19.11.13 on:

<http://de.academic.ru/dic.nsf/dewiki/1061000>

Auzépy, Marie France: "State of Emergency (700-850)" in: *The Cambridge history of the Byzantine Empire : c. 500-1492* / edited by Jonathan Shepard, Cambridge University press, 2008

Brubaker, Leslie and Haldon, John: *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850: a history*. Cambridge 2011

Brubaker, Leslie and Haldon, John: *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca 680-850): The Sources – An annotated Survey*. Ashgate 2001

Bury, J.B. *History of the Later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene, Vol.I*, Cosimo Inc. 1889a

Bury, J.B. *History of the Later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene, Vol.II*, Cosimo Inc. 1889b

Bury, J.B. *The Idea of Progress*. The Project Gutenberg Etext [Macmillan 1920]

Last accessed 12.11.2013 on :

[http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk\\_files=3188712&pageno=6](http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=3188712&pageno=6)

Gero, Stephen: *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Constantine V: With particular attention to the oriental Sources*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalum. 1977

Gibbon, Edward: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Vol I*. With Introduction, notes and appendices by J.B.Bury, Methuen & Co. 1909 [1776]

Gibbon, Edward: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Vol II*. With Introduction, notes and appendices by J.B.Bury, Methuen & Co. 1909 [1781]

Gibbon, Edward: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Vol V*. With Introduction, notes and appendices by J.B.Bury, Methuen & Co. 1911 [1788]

Gibbon, Edward: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Vol VI*. With Introduction, notes and appendices by J.B.Bury, Methuen & Co. 1912 [1788]

Haldon, J.F.: *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The transformation of a culture*  
Cambridge University Press 1990

Haldon, John: “Greek Fire ’revisited: recent and current research” in *Byzantine Style, Religion and Civilization: In Honour of Sir Steven Runciman*. Edited by Elizabeth Jeffreys, Cambridge University Press, 2006

Jordan, David P.: *Gibbon and his Roman Empire*. University of Illinois Press, 1971

Kaegi, Walter E.: “Confronting Islam: emperors versus caliphs (641–c. 850)” in: *The Cambridge history of the Byzantine Empire : c. 500-1492* / edited by Jonathan Shepard, Cambridge University press, 2008

Kaegi, Walter E.: *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium*. Cambridge University Press, 2003

Lombard. Alfred: “Constantin V, Empereur des Romains: Etudes d’histoire Byzantine” in *Bibliothèque de la Faculté des Lettres; XVI*. Éditeur Félix Alcan, Paris 1902

Nikephoros, patriarch of Constantinople

Mango, Cyril:

*Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople: Short History Text, Translation and commentary by Cyril Mango*, Dumbarton Oaks 1990 [assumed 780's]

Ostrogorsky, George: *History of the Byzantine State: 2d edition*. Basil Blackwell, 1968  
[In German 1940]

*Putzgers Historischer Weltatlas: Jubiläumsausgabe. 84 Auflage*. Edited by Dr. H. Schultze, Velhagen Klasing, Bielefeld 1963

Schmidt, Kristian Hansen: *Higi-eksperimentet: mastergradsoppgave I Dokumentasjonsvitenskap og dokumentteori*, Universitetet i Tromsø, 2008

Speck, Paul: *Artabasdos, der rechtgläubige Vorkämpfer der götlichen Lehren: Untersuchungen zur Revolte des Artabasdos und ihrer darstellung in der byzantinischen Historiographie*, Dr. Rudolf Habelt GMBH. 1981

Theophanes Confessor, saint

Scott, Roger

Mango, Cyril:

*The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor : Byzantine and Near Eastern history, AD 284-813 / translated with introduction and commentary by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott ; with the assistance of Geoffrey Greatrex* Oxford: Clarendon 1997 [ca. 814]

Treadgold, Warren: *A history of the Byzantine state and society*. Stanford University Press 1997

Treadgold, Warren: *Byzantium and Its Army 284 – 1081*. Stanford University Press, 1995

*Verdenshistorien I kart, tekst og bilder*. Red Lars Mytting, Bjørn Quiller, Jeremy Black et al, N.W. Damm & søn 2000

Whitby, Michael: "Bury, John Bagnell" in *Oxford Dictionary of national Biography*,  
Oxford Univesrity Press 2004-13.

Last accessed the 26.09.13 on: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32202>

Wormersley, David: *The transformation of The Decline and fall of the Roman Empire*,  
Cambridge University Press, 1988

## Appendix I

The conclusion of Alfred Lombard's Biography of Constantine V (Lombard 1902).

Translated By Lila Gleizes medio November 2013.

The judgment we may make about Constantin V will always depend on the opinion we have on the questions of images and monks. I will only sum up the facts that seem to be evident for the historian.

We first saw that Constantin V, who was an object of loathing and horror for chronicler and hagiographer monks, had lived, according to contemporaries, "in glory and success". We saw that his memory had survived at least for two generations in a large part of Byzantine population. We then observed that his military career was indeed very remarkable, that he managed to defend successfully all his frontiers, and that he ensured a new prestige to Roman arms. His political and administrative career indicates a singular cleverness. Constantin V clearly understood the new situation of the Greek Empire and the part it was bound to play in the world. His reign is mostly important for progresses of Hellenism and the ethnographic formation of the Empire.

When it comes to the religious Reformation, which was the most important to him, it was more than an instrument for political domination. It originated in a sincere wish to give the people a purer religion. The question of images is linked to a large set of reforms. The works of Isaurian emperors are one of the main and more respectable efforts to rise material, moral and intellectual levels of a people. This huge attempt of organization is as important as the one of Charlemagne. On many aspects it appears more intelligent and closer to our modern concepts.

The administrative system introduced by Leon III the Isaurian functions and is regulated with Constantin, reforms are successful. Constantin's successors will only make timid and progressive changes to the impressive set of political and religious reforms he let them. And all of this considerable work won't be lost.

If Byzance then experienced a new greatness, a stunning resurgence that lasted for two and a half centuries, it is probably thanks to the works of iconoclasts, to Constantin's reign and to his thirty five years of prosperity, and of intelligent and strong administration.

Appendix 2-6 are removed from the online version of the thesis.