Did emperor Leo III introduce imperial iconoclasm?

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the origins of Byzantine iconoclasm, traditionally attributed to Emperor Leo III in the second quarter of the 8th century. It examines the influence of the Islamic world on Leo's actions, considering whether Arab interactions may have prompted him to issue an edict against icons. Offering a counterargument, the essay also evaluates the possibility that imperial iconoclasm stemmed from Leo's personal religious convictions rather than external influences. However, as this essay argues, the lack of evidence supporting an imperial edict during Leo's reign suggests, as some historians contend, that it is unlikely he formally introduced iconoclasm at a large scale. The analysis draws on contemporary sources, letters from Patriarch Germanos, and the controversial Chalke Gate incident. It concludes by shifting responsibility for the introduction of imperial iconoclasm to Leo's son, Constantine V, who more evidently implemented and enforced the policy through pragmatic and aggressive measures against icon veneration and monasticism.

The start of Byzantine iconomachy is widely attributed to emperor Leo III and his actions against icons in the second quarter of the 8th century, propelling schism and creating the iconoclasm controversy. This essay will explore the impacts of the influence exerted by the Islamic world while attempting to logically explain the issuing of an edict due to Arab interactions. By offering a counterargument, this essay will consequently explore Leo's beliefs and attempt to place the introduction of imperial iconoclasm as a self-motivated policy stemmed from his religious conscience. However, as this essay will argue, the simple lack of evidence supporting an introduction of iconoclasm at an imperial scale during Leo's reign indicates, as historians have explored, it is unlikely that an edict purporting such policy was issued by Leo III. The pillars of this argument are the analysis and critical evaluation of (a) contemporary sources, (b) the letters of Patriarch Germanos, and (c) the chalke gate. Lastly, the essay will provide an alternative interpretation to the question, by attempting to absolve Leo of such accusations and shifting the focus to his son, Constantine V, as the creator of imperial iconoclasm.

The difficulty in assessing Leo III's role in the onset of the iconoclast controversy is due to the lack of sources narrating that period in history. However, some modern historians have justified Leo's support for the policy on the Arabic influence present through constant conflicts and interactions which credit the interpretation that he did introduce imperial iconoclasm. Factors such as the emperor's Syrian heritage and the constant Arab invasions and warfare that plagued periods during his reign are argued by some historians to have influenced his introduction of the policy. Leo's nickname recalled by Theophanes (Theophanes, *Chrongraphia AM 6218*, 405), 'Saracen-minded', offers insight into the oriental influence experienced by the emperor and the mindset he endorsed. Evidently, the emperor was seen by his contemporaries as a supporter of Islamic ideology, and as the religion also adhered to a strict iconoclastic ideology it is feasible to argue that Leo introduced iconoclasm naturally as a shared belief. The perceptive iconoclastic practice of Islam is shown through Caliph Abd Al-Malik's change to the coinage by adding quotes from the Qur'an to substitute his imperial image in the 690s.[1] Therefore, it can be credited that Leo, while seeing the Arab growth and successful expansion, also chose to adhere to similar strategies and ideology in an attempt to emulate success.

Historians have generally refuted this argument as Islamic interactions are seen as the reason why icon veneration intensified in the 7th century rather than the cause for iconoclasm. Furthermore, oriental influences do not offer direct evidence that Leo issued an edict, therefore their attribution as the cause for iconoclasm or proof of it lacks reliability. Brubaker L. eloquently explains the origins of icon worshipping as being the contemporary realisation of the permanent establishment of Islam and the complete loss of Byzantine territory to the Arabs,

[1] Herrin, J. (2014). 860

which consequently generated an emphasis on icon veneration as the answer to the crisis.[2] Conclusively, a more acceptable adaptation of the argument for Leo's introduction of imperial iconoclasm rests on the axiom that it was based on Leo's interpretation of the Second Commandment and his personality, as Gero describes it, "an imperial heresy, 'born in the purple', in the royal palace".[3]

The emperor's own volition to interfere with the established religious practices and affect the status quo of the Empire can be regarded as evidence of the implementation of imperial iconoclasm. The prologue of the Ecloga issued in 726, as argued by Gero, shows the emperor's feelings of inner obligation and responsibility to dictate religious matters, as he "regarded his role as that of Hezekiah or Josiah *redivivus*".[4] Contemporary accounts of Leo's reign confirm his impious iconoclasm and ascribe the onset of the controversy to his interpretation of the volcanic eruptions in the islands of Thera and Therasia in 726 as signs of "divine wrath" (Nikephoros, *Breviarium* 60) due to the general rejection to follow the Second Commandment. Nikephoros, a future iconodule patriarch writing around the 780s, recalls the impact of the emperor's adherence to the "position contrary to the true faith" (Nikephoros, *Breviarium* 60) as being one of rebellion by the inhabitants of Hellas and the Cyclades. The rebels, who collected a great fleet to attack Constantinople and elected Kosmas their emperor, had their motives attributed by both Nikephoros and Theophanes– contemporary writers– as general disagreement towards the religious policies of emperor Leo III. It is evident from contemporary accounts that the emperor certainly subscribed to an iconoclastic philosophy and very likely attempted to enforce his views on the habitants of the empire as according to Theophanes, Leo and his supporters intensified the persecution of holy icons after the rebellion (Theophanes,

[2] Brubaker, L. (2012). 16-17
[3] Stephan Gero (1973), 131
[4] Rosser, J. (1979). *54*(4), 805

Chrongraphia AM 6218, 405). Conclusively, Leo's sense of responsibility and his interpretation of natural events in addition to primary accounts of his hatred for icons and their supporters is sufficient to assume he introduced imperial iconoclasm.

Despite the evident incline of contemporary accounts to blame Leo III for the introduction of an imperial edict propelling the iconoclastic cause, the origin of the primary sources mentioned must be critically disintegrated and evaluated to understand their limited reliability for modern historians. Nikephoros' *'A short history'* was written during the reign of Constantine VI who was under the regency of Irene, an iconodule. In the same period, the Second Council of Nicaea (787) took place, issuing a decree in favour of the veneration of icons, ending the first phase of iconoclasm. Transparent from the context, Nikephoros' narration is arguably a mere propaganda auxiliary to the iconophile cause, as it will be argued, the events as he describes have been adapted to fit the iconophile account of Leo's reign with the purpose to blame the emperor for the introduction of an iconoclastic edict. Brubaker and Haldon have criticised the veracity of the claims expressed in *'A short history'*, offering a tantalising alternative view to the motifs commonly attributed to the rebellion by the Helladic army in 726. While some historians adhered to the notion that iconoclastic policies by the emperor caused the rebellion, the historians aforementioned presented an alternative argument ascribing the reasons for the uprising being fiscal policies by emperor Leo III in response to the warfare against the Arabs.[5] This interpretation is convincing as the Helladic regions did not experience the full scale of war but were still taxed at a higher rate than before. Altogether, Nikephoros offers insight into the socio-political reaction towards the ongoing religious schism, while simultaneously revealing the emperor's sentiment towards iconoclasm as being one of adherence. However,

[5] Brubaker, & Haldon, J. F. (2011). *80-81*

the inaccuracy of events and lack of evidence offered about the issuing of an imperial-wide edict limits the usefulness of the source in understanding whether Leo introduced the religious policy.

The arguments that assert Leo's issuance of an imperial edict due to Islamic influence or his own belief in the Second Commandment are valid but not sound, as they withhold no evidence of a general policy being implemented during the reign of Leo III. Therefore, it ought to be accepted that Brubaker and Haldon's sceptic analysis that claims there is no evidence that an edict was issued during Leo III's reign offers the most peripherally analysed and evidence-based conclusion available to historians due to its impartial and highly critical interpretation of sources available.[6]

The historians, Brubaker more extensively in two additional documents, successfully dismantled the contemporary sources and events that accused Leo III of introducing imperial iconoclasm. Their arguments will be broken down into three sections that tackle different sources and evidence. Firstly, the historians tackle the key contemporary accounts written by iconodules after Leo's reign. Secondly, by analysing Patriarch Germanos' letters to Constantine of Nakoleia written during his patriarchy and to Thomas of Klaudioupolis after abdicating his position. Lastly, by critically challenging the occurrence of the Chalke Gate incident, a conclusion can be reached that evidence – or the lack of– indicates that Leo III did not introduce imperial iconoclasm.

[6] Brubaker, & Haldon, J. F. (2011). *119*

Historians of this period generally question the validity of contemporary sources. Three sources that comment on Leo III's iconoclasm: *Liber Pontificalis, Life* of Stephen the Younger, and the *Chronicle* of Theophanes. While the *Liber* mentions three actions about Leo against icons, they have all shown to be later additions to enhance the anti-iconoclast credentials of the pope.[7] Both *Life* and the *Chronicle* were written 80 years after the events described and both mention the Chalke Gate– an event that will later be critically evaluated. Therefore, it is evident that iconophile sources served as mere propaganda and have limited contextual or historical value due to their omissions and distortions of true events as well as the creation of new ones with the purpose to vilify their opponents. As no true iconoclast source has survived from the period due to the iconophile victory in 843, the analysis of existing sources reveals no concrete evidence of Leo III introducing imperial iconoclasm. However, they withhold enough material to conclude that it is feasible that the emperor was a supporter of iconoclasm.

While offering a scope into the religious schism, Germanos' letter to John of Synnada about Constantine of Nakoleia shortly before 726 localises the iconoclastic sentiment in the Byzantine empire while showing early opposition to the movement. In this letter, Germanos asks John to quietly deal with Constantine's iconoclastic practices as his superior, without summoning a synod.[8] Evidently, the issue had not reached the magnitude described by Nikephoros and Theophanes by 726, as Germanos' actions show the issue was localised and at a small scale, easy to deal with. However, the existence of iconoclasm earlier than 726 is significant as it shows iconoclasm as a popular movement rather than an enforced imperial practice. More intriguingly, the letter to Thomas believed to be written after his patriarchy reveals a more widespread iconoclastic sentiment but also affirms the emperor to be a friend

[7] Brubaker, L. (2012). 27-28
[8] Brubaker, & Haldon, J. F. (2011). *a history. 96*

of icons, installing religious images in front of his palace.[9] The difference between the two letters shows the progress of iconoclasm while simultaneously revealing the lack of imperial initiative in its implementation, as Germanos praises the emperor supposedly after he was dismissed from office. Finally, it can be inferred that the emperor did not introduce imperial iconoclasm, as the former patriarch's writing places Leo III as an iconophile, supporting the cause by erecting icons.

Lastly, both Theophanes's *Chronicle* and the *Life* of St. Stephen describe the event that took place in 726 in which emperor Leo III ordered a soldier to remove an icon of Christ from the Chalke Gate– the public face of the emperor's palace. Brubaker intelligently analyses the lack of descriptions of the gate before 800 and the lack of accounts about the event before said year, making its veracity dubitable. Therefore, the acceptance of Auzépy's argument is logical, as she convincingly encapsulates the desired purpose of the sources by asserting that they were merely the product of propaganda by the iconophile cause and forged after 800 to legitimise empress Irene.[10] In *Life,* the description of the local reaction to the emperor's order to removal of the icon as women "moved by zeal" shows an attempt by the source to heroize the individuals while portraying a battle of faiths between the strong (emperor's guard) against the weak (defenceless women).[11]Conclusively, the iconophile adaptations and propaganda inherent in contemporary sources elucidate the unreliability of accusations that Leo III introduced imperial iconoclasm.

Alternatively, in concluding the lack of evidence suggesting that Leo III introduced imperial iconoclasm, it will be suggested that Constantine V was responsible for its implementation.

[9] Brubaker, L. (2012). 24
[10] Auzépy, M.-F. (1990). 476-492
[11] Leslie Brubaker (1999) 23:1, 262-263

Primarily, to reinforce the argument that Leo did not introduce iconoclasm at an imperial-wide scale, an assessment of the letters between pope Gregory II and Leo III located in the *Liber Pontificalis* must be re-analysed in a different perspective. Supposing that they did contain orders by the emperor urging the pope to subscribe to his policy to remove icons, Brubaker and Haldon persuasively argued that they were simply iusssiones, which is a term describing an order to a specific party.[12] Consequently, it can be deduced that since the papal lands were a part of the Byzantine empire, the emperor simply wanted the pope to comply with his personal beliefs, therefore it does not offer sufficient evidence to imply an imperial edict was the subject matter. The focus must then be shifted to Constantine, as it is widely argued, there has been no evidence for a breach in relations between Rome and Constantinople until the Council of Hieria (754).[13] Constantine's iconoclasm and conflicts with the church are manifested through his monachomachy, which resulted in the death of Stephen the Younger alongside the persecution of "wearers of the idolatrous monastic habit" and the secularisation of monastic lands.[14] The attack against monasticism came after the iconoclastic council of 754 that asserted the iconoclastic doctrine, quintessentially conveying Constantine's iconoclastic praxis and revealing his pragmatic agenda against the iconophile cause, as opposed to Leo III's dogmatic philosophy.

In conclusion, the arguments related to Islamic influence and Leo's personal beliefs do not offer enough evidence to attribute the foundation of imperial iconoclasm to Leo III. While contemporary writers offer a compelling insight on the emperor's iconoclasm by giving historians a scope into the status quo changes caused by the attack on the religious institution

[12] Brubaker, & Haldon, J. F. (2011). *82*
[13] Brubaker, & Haldon, J. F. (2011). *85*
[14] Gero, S. (1977). 28(3), 242-243

of the empire, their lack of reliability due to falsifiable accounts and undue iconophile allegiance hinders their use as a historical source of facts. Therefore, the most plausible answer to the question is that of Brubaker and Haldon, that there is a lack of evidence that Leo introduced an imperial-wide policy. Conclusively, the alternative view that Constantine V was responsible for the introduction of imperial iconoclasm is more convincing, as through his break in relations with the papacy in 754 and the war on monasticism it becomes clear that Constantine's pragmatic approaches infer an introduction of iconoclasm

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