Between 726 and 843 the Byzantine Empire was embroiled in a theological debate known as the Iconoclast Controversy. Like the later religious conflicts of Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe, Byzantine Iconoclasm had wide-ranging political and social repercussions, as well as profoundly affecting the conditions for artistic production. The Iconoclast Controversy was specifically concerned with the appropriateness of images in the context of worship, and documentary records from this period show how religious art became the focus for intense, often violent, dispute over its place in Christian society. As we have seen in previous chapters, images came to be ubiquitous in the religious life of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, and, since the foundations and entire superstructure of the Byzantine Empire were religious, a radical questioning of the use of images could be considered comparable to challenging—for example—the role of democracy in a modern Western state. The implications of this controversy for the development of Western art have been profound; indeed, no other culture or society is known to have engaged in such a prolonged and serious debate over the role of the visual.

The historical background to Iconoclasm involved widespread changes taking place in the Byzantine Empire during the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries, in particular the threat posed by the rise of the militant new religion of Islam from the early seventh century onwards. In the context of the visual arts, however, it is the arguments themselves and the actions they gave rise to that exert a particular fascination. As we listen to the debates that raged in successive Church councils, to learned evidence, propaganda and anecdote, we are taken to the centre of Byzantine ideas concerning art and religion, and to a world in which authority defined itself in terms of its stance on the question of Iconoclasm.
The word iconoclasm comes from the Greek words *eikòn* (icon or image) and *klaò* (break or destroy), and means literally the deliberate destruction of images. While this still takes place today, and thus Christianity had inherited from Judaism a fierce antipathy to the misuse of religious images. This was based on the commands given by God to Moses: 'Thou shalt not make an idol ... Thou shalt not bow down to [idols] nor serve them' (Exodus 20:4–5). The word 'idol' (*Greek* *eíδolon*), like 'icon', also has the root meaning 'image', but its connotations became totally negative. Idols were decried in the Bible as images of false gods. Those who worshipped idols (idolaters) were therefore followers of false gods; pagans had idols, Christians did not. In one view – the fundamental view of the iconoclasts – Christians had become idolaters by worshipping images, and must therefore be displeasing to God. The only possible remedy was to remove the offending cause: the icons (or idols). In addition to those who smashed images, there were people who burned them (iconocasts), and the term most commonly employed at the time for someone who was opposed to their use was *eikonomachos* or 'image-fighter'. On the other hand, there were people who loved images (iconophiles) and who served them (iconodules), and who were able to marshal impressive arguments upholding the Christian tradition of religious imagery.

The argument against images focused on their role in worship, and there can be no question that by the eighth century religious images had come to be used in what could be considered illegitimate ways. This is best judged not by the polemical and prejudiced literature of the Iconoclast controversy itself, but from passing references in earlier sources in which the use (or abuse) of images was not itself an issue. For example, the monk John Moschos (d.c.634) reports the following story in a collection of edifying accounts:

In our times a pious woman of the region of Apamea dug a well. She spent a great deal of money and went down to a great depth, but did not strike water. So she was despondent on account both of her toil and her expenditure. One day she sees a man [in a vision] who says to her: 'Send for the likeness of the monk Theodosios of Skopelos, and, thanks to him, God will grant you water.' Straightaway the woman sent two men to fetch the saint's image, and she lowered it into the well. And immediately the water came out so that half the hole was filled.

There is nothing at all religious about the context in which the image of St Theodosios of Skopelos was being used in this account. The image, presumably a painting on a wooden panel (did the woman send two men because it was large and heavy?), was employed because it was believed to have miraculous powers, and this indeed proved to be the case.

The collection of miracle stories connected with the healing saints Cosmas and Damian, written down at about the same period, provides further insights into popular beliefs – that one could, for example, eat the plaster, on which the two saints' images were painted, for a cure:

[A certain woman] depicted [the saints Cosmas and Damian] on all the walls of her house, being as she was insatiable in her desire of seeing them. [She then fell ill.] Perceiving herself to be in danger, she crawled out of bed and, upon reaching the place where these most wise saints were depicted on the wall, she stood up leaning on her faith as upon a stick and scraped off with her fingernails some plaster. This she put into water and, after drinking the mixture, she was immediately cured of her pains by the visitation of the saints.

In this case the magical power seems to reside in the material of which the image is made. While artists certainly did not paint holy images in the expectation that they were going to be used in this way, such practices may have been widespread. No doubt anyone
who heard or read this story would have felt encouraged by it to imitate the woman's actions. From a modern perspective it must seem ironic that this extreme level of devotion to images led people at times deliberately to damage or destroy them in a fashion that was in effect iconoclastic, although in motivation iconophilic (or idolatrous, depending on your point of view).

Another Cosmas and Damian miracle records a different use of icons. The story involves a soldier who always carried about with him 'out of faith and for his own protection' an image of the two saints. The image was, therefore, regarded by its possessor as a phylactery (an amulet or talisman believed to ward off evil, of the sort familiar in many cultures). But because it was an image representing the saints (and not an abstracted symbol such as the cross, or non-representational object such as a precious stone), it had an additional function. The soldier's wife was able to recognize the saints, who had appeared to her in a dream, when her husband later showed her the image he carried 'in the wallet under his arm'. Thus the magical world of the saints was brought into the everyday experience of the Byzantines through the ubiquitous presence of such images.

In none of these stories are we told that the images, although undoubtedly religious, were displayed or used in the context of a church. Nor are we told of people worshipping such images, like pagans before idols, for the accounts were written by authors who knew very well that idolatry was wrong. Nonetheless, the impression such stories convey is of a credulous populace for whom the religious image was widely perceived as a source of magical power. Iconoclasts argued that all religious images were by their nature susceptible to abuse in this way and should therefore be suppressed.

In arguing for the use of images, the iconodule or iconophile position was far more complex than the iconoclast view. It was based on three principal arguments involving: first, the use to which images were put; second, the appeal to tradition; and third, the definition of what constituted an image. The argument that Christians worshipped images, and hence had become idolaters, was flatly denied. Theologians proposed that people merely venerated images, not believing them to be holy in themselves, but as representing something holy which would receive this veneration. This must be considered a weak argument, since it requires every individual Christian to observe the subtle distinction between worship and veneration.

The argument from tradition appears at first much stronger. The use of religious images, it was stated, was as old as the Gospels themselves. As it happens, we know this belief to have been completely erroneous, but it was not merely a convenient invention by the iconophiles of the eighth and ninth centuries. We can best judge this, as before, from pre-iconoclast writings, such as the Life of St Pankratius, a text written by a certain Evagrius perhaps in the seventh century. It includes the following story:

The blessed apostle Peter sent for the painter Joseph and said to him: 'Make me the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ so that, on seeing the form of his face, the people may believe all the more and be reminded of what I have preached to them'. And the apostle said: 'Paint also mine and that of my brother Pankratius so that those who use them for remembrance may say, "This was the apostle Peter who preached the word of God among us ...".' So the young painter made these also and wrote on each image its own name. This is what the apostles did in all the cities and villages from Jerusalem as far as Antioch. And having taken thought, Peter made the entire picture-story of the incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, beginning with the angel's crying 'Hail' to the Virgin [ie the Annunciation], and ending with the Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and he commanded that churches should be decorated with this story. From this time onward these things were given earnest attention by everyone and they were depicted on panels and parchment, and were given to bishops who, upon completing the construction of a church, depicted them both beautifully and decorously.

The authenticity of such stories was not questioned, even by the iconoclasts. The argument they permit was then reformulated in the carefully chosen words appropriate to the decisions of a Church Council, as at Nicaea in 787:
The making of icons is not an invention of painters, but an institution and tradition of the Catholic Church. Whatever is ancient is worthy of respect, said St Basil, and we have as testimony the antiquity of the institution and the teaching of our inspired Fathers, namely that when they saw icons in holy churches they were gratified, and when they themselves built holy churches they set up images in them ... The conception and the tradition [of using holy images] are therefore theirs and not the painter's; for the painter's domain is limited to his art, whereas the disposition manifestly pertains to the Holy Fathers who built [the churches].

The Patriarch Nikephoros (deposed in 815, d.828) expressed the same point even more succinctly:

We affirm that the delineation or representation of Christ was not instituted by us, that it was not begun in our generation, nor is it a recent invention. Painting is dignified by age, it is distinguished by antiquity, and is coeval with the preaching of the Gospel ... These sacred representations came into existence and flourished ... from the very beginning.

Note how Nikephoros steps adroitly from the statement that images of Christ are not 'a recent invention' (a point which in the ninth century was obvious to everybody), to assert that they go back to the time of Christ himself. Who could disprove this assertion? No iconoclast, certainly, could hope to prove that images of Christ did not go back to His lifetime. This, then, was a telling argument.

The final iconodule argument revolved around the definition of what constituted 'an icon'. Like our word 'image', the Greek eikôn has a wide range of meanings, which was duly exploited. This is what a leading supporter of images, St John of Damascus (d.c. 750 – he lived beyond the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire) said in answer to the question 'What is an image?':

An image is a likeness, an exemplar or a figure of something, such as to show in itself the subject represented. Surely, the image is not in all respects similar to its prototype; it is its subject; for the image is one thing and its subject another, and there is necessarily a difference between them.

Thus far we have no difficulty in following him. But this is only the start. He then answers the further question 'How many different kinds of images are there?' in the following way, giving a taste of the complexity of contemporary theological argument on the subject:

The first, natural and identical image of the invisible God is the Son of the Father [ie Christ] ...

The second kind of image is God's knowledge of what will be done by Him ...

The third kind of image is the one made by God in the way of imitation, a man [Genesis 1:26] ...

The fourth kind of image is when Scripture invents figures, forms and symbols for invisible and incorporeal things and the latter are represented in bodily form [eg angels].

The fifth kind of image is said to be the one which represents and delineates the future in advance ... as the [brazen] serpent [set up by Moses at God's command (Numbers 21:8–9) represents] Him who by means of the cross [ie Christ] was to heal the bite of the [other] serpent [ie the Devil] ...

The sixth kind of image serves to record events, be it a miracle or a virtuous deed ... This is of two kinds: in the form of speech that is written in books ... and in the form of visual contemplation [of images] ... So, even now, we eagerly delineate images of the virtuous men of the past [ie the saints] for the sake of love and remembrance.

In John of Damascus's scheme images, together with written words, come sixth and last in the list. But this does not mean they are the least important; in an argument it is often the last point that is the most telling. John prepares the ground with the preceding five examples, which, since they are arguments in favour of images derived from the actions of God and the words of the Bible, can scarcely be disputed. For the iconophile, the existence of the sixth kind of image,
the religious text or artwork, was legitimised by the preceding five.
To argue against pictorial images was thus, according to John of
Damascus, to argue against the actions of God. This formulation
proved irrefutable, and has stood the test of time.

St John of Damascus’s defence of images was written in response to
the attack that had been made on them in the early stages of the
Iconoclast Controversy, and we must now turn to the historical
context in which this assault on tradition took place.

In the sixth century the emperor Justinian had presided over
a period of territorial conquest and vigorous artistic productivity. For
the following century and a half, however, the Byzantine Empire experi-
enced a prolonged series of setbacks. There were devastating
outbreaks of plague in the 540s (and again in the 740s). There were
further invasions by Germanic, Slavic and Turkic peoples (including
the Lombards, Huns, Avars and Bulgars) who overran the Balkans and
Italy. The Holy Land was conquered by the Persians in 614. Jerusalem
sacked and its churches despoiled. (John Moschos was a refugee from
this assault.) In 626, Constantinople itself was besieged by the Avars
(from the north) and the Persians who had crossed Asia Minor. The
city’s preservation was credited to the personal intervention of the
Mother of God, who was allegedly seen fighting outside the walls.
Her image was set up on the city’s Golden Gate, to drive away ‘the
foreign and devilish troops’, and carried in procession around the
walls. The relic of her amphonion (veil), preserved in a gold and silver
casket in the church of Blachernae, came to be regarded as the palla-
dion of the city, ensuring its safety.

The greatest threat to the Byzantine Empire, however, was the rise of
the new and militant religion of Islam in the Middle East. After
Muhammed’s death in 632, the Muslim Arabs began their rapid
conquests. In 636 they overwhelmed what was left of the Persian
Empire. Jerusalem, recaptured in 620 by the Byzantine emperor
Heraclius, fell to the Arabs in 638. In due course much of the
Mediterranean coastline and many of its islands were lost. The Arabs
raided Asia Minor continuously, besieging Constantinople from 674
to 678 and from 717 to 718 (when once again an image of the
Theotokos was carried round the walls). In the late seventh century
and early eighth the landscape of the Byzantine world was trans-
formed; many of the Late Antique cities, still flourishing in the mid-
sixth century, were completely abandoned. Only the walls of
Constantinople and Thessaloniki kept the invaders at bay. It is no
exaggeration to say that there were times when the Byzantine
Empire was reduced effectively to those two cities.

At one level, the official policy of Iconoclasm was undoubtedly a
response to this long catalogue of disasters. It began under Emperor
Leo III (r.717–41), a successful general who came from the Syrian
borderlands of the empire and usurped the throne in 717. In 725,
according to the chronicler Theophanes, Leo III began to formulate a
logos (here meaning a ‘document’ or ‘policy’) condemning holy
images. In 726, after a terrible earthquake, taken to be a divine
portent, the image of Christ above the Chalice (Brazenn) Gate of the
imperial palace in Constantinople was removed (it is said; perhaps
it looked like Sinai Christ; see 55). Some of the emperor’s men
(we are told) were killed by iconophiles, thus bringing the first
(iconoclast) victims of Iconoclasm. In 730 Leo III promulgated an
edict requiring the removal of religious images from all churches,
and he replaced the iconophile Patriarch Germanus with an icono-
clast, Patriarch Anastasios. Whether the edict of 730 was enforced,
and if so with what vigour, we cannot now say.

Leo III seems to have believed that God was displeased with the
Byzantines on account of some misdemeanour. It was widely held at
the time that Muslims were Christian heretics, worshipping the same
God but in an incorrect way. Since Muslims had chosen to eschew
images in their mosques, and were extraordinarily successful in
battle, it was thought that God might be punishing the Byzantines
for misusing religious images and falling into idolatry. The solution
appeared simple: to ban the use of religious images in Byzantium and
hope for divine approval, which would become apparent through
political and military success. Leo’s reign of twenty-five years –
longer than that of his five predecessors combined – could thus be
interpreted as an indication of God’s satisfaction with Iconoclasm.
In 754 a Church Council met at the Hiereia palace in a suburb of Constantinople under Leo III's son and successor the emperor Constantine V, and later at the Blachernae Church. It issued a definition of Iconoclasm as orthodox Christian faith, and from this point onwards many images were destroyed or whitewashed over, and the supporters of images were subject to persecution. This policy was, however, reversed by a Church Council at Nicaea in 787, called by the empress Irene (widow of Constantine V's son and successor), and later regarded as ecumenical (ie representing the entire Church). Iconoclasm was condemned as a detestable error, and in due course an image of Christ was again placed above the Chalke Gate of the imperial palace.

The defeat of Iconoclasm at Nicaea, however, proved to be shortlived. In 814 the emperor Leo V had the Chalke image removed again, and in 815 a second Iconoclast Council was convened, this time at St Sophia, Constantinople. It condemned the Iconophile Council of 787, and reaffirmed the conclusions of the Iconoclast Council of 754. The pendulum had swung back, and a second period of Iconoclasm began. Finally in 843, an iconophile empress again intervened decisively: in the name of her son, the emperor Michael III, Empress Theodora finally and definitively restored the veneration of images, and replaced the icon of Christ at the Chalke Gate.

To judge by written sources, the image of Christ above the Chalke Gate of the imperial palace at Constantinople played a crucial role in displaying publicly – by its presence or absence – current imperial policy on images. It no longer survives, but the church of the Dormition in Nicaea (originally the monastery of Hyalinths) had an apse mosaic that seems to have experienced a related history. Unfortunately it was destroyed in 1922, but old photographs reveal an interesting tale (87). The main element of the apse mosaic was a standing Theotokos and Child. Around this can be seen an irregular black line on the gold background, following approximately the outline of Mary, and cutting across the jewelled step on which she stands. Level with her elbows can be traced a further black line, extending to either side in the rough shape of a cross. Above the
Theotokos, the hand of God (also surrounded by a black line) extended from a segment of heaven, and an inscription read: 'I have begotten thee from the womb before the morning' (Psalm 109:3).

The black lines on the mosaic visible until 1972 marked irregularities of the surface on which dust and dirt had collected. They were the sutures between different phases of activity, where the old plaster had been cut and new mosaic tesserae on fresh plaster inserted. They show that the Theotokos and Child was from the final phase (as was the Hand of God). This composition must have been a replacement for a large cross. But the cross was itself a replacement for the original scheme: this too must have been a Mother and Child, of which the inscription and most of the jewelled step (and the plain gold background) had been preserved through all the other changes. To either side in the presbytery vault were pairs of angels; these too had been removed and then replaced. We can thus deduce that in order to economize on labour and materials, only such areas of the mosaic as had to be altered were cut away, replastered and reset.

From the evidence of inscriptions we know the names of the church's founder, Hyakinthos, and its restorer, Naukratios, but their work cannot be dated precisely. Hyakinthos probably built and decorated his monastery before 726, and the images of the Theotokos, Christ and the archangels were presumably removed and a cross placed in the apse during Iconoclasm, perhaps in the 750s or 760s. The final restoration by Naukratios probably dates from after 843.

To focus on the church at Nicaea, or the written accounts of the Chalkle Gate image of Christ, is perhaps to gain the impression that artists were kept busy during the Iconoclast Controversy in taking down and putting up images. These cases, however, were undoubtedly the exceptions. When the iconophile empress Irene and emperor Constantine VI sponsored the mosaic decoration of the apse of the church of St Sophia in Thessaloniki, probably at some time between 787 and 797, after Iconoclasm had been rejected at Nicaea but before the empress blinded her son, a cross rather than a figurative image was set in the semidome of the apse. This was the same scheme as the iconoclast emperor Constantine V had employed in the semi-
dome of the apse of the church of St Irene in Constantinople, when it was rebuilt after a severe earthquake in 740 (the cross had been considered a suitable apse decoration since at least the early fifth century). The cross in St Irene is still there today (88), but in St Sophia in Thessaloniki it was changed for a Theotokos and Child (89). Yet this change did not happen shortly after the official end of Iconoclasm in 843, as at Nicaea, but some two centuries later, to judge from the style of the workmanship.

While the monumental mosaics discussed above were carefully altered, Iconoclasm more usually entailed the irrecoverable destruction of images. We can gain a vivid sense of what was lost from the proceedings of the Iconophile Council of Nicaea in 787.

Demetrius the God-loving deacon and sacristan said: 'When I was promoted sacrist at the holy Great Church [St Sophia] at Constantinople, I examined the inventory and found that two books with silver bindings with images were missing. Having searched for them I discovered that the heretics had thrown them in the fire and burnt them. I found another book ... which dealt with the holy icons. The leaves containing passages on icons had been cut out by these deceivers. I have this book in my hands and I am showing it to the Holy Synod.' The same Demetrius opened the book and showed to everyone the excision of the leaves.

Leontius the holy secretary said: 'There is, O Fathers, another astonishing thing about this book. As you can see it has silver covers and on either side of them it is adorned with the images of all the saints. Letting these be, I mean the images, they cut out what was written inside about images, which is a sign of utter folly.' ...

Leo, the most holy bishop of Phokia said: 'This book has lost its leaves, whereas in the city in which I live they have burnt more than thirty books.' ...

Tarasius, the most holy Patriarch, said: 'They have scraped not only holy icons, but also [the images in or on] Gospel Books and other sacred objects.'
To see what this meant in practice we can take a specific instance from the church of St Sophia in Constantinople (90). On the southern side of the western gallery is a locked door, behind which is a suite of rooms that belonged to the palace of the patriarch, which adjoined the cathedral church on the south side. The rooms were known as the large sekreton (council chamber) and the small sekreton, and were built on to the church of Justinian by Patriarch John III between 565 and 577. The large sekreton functioned at different times as a vesting room for the patriarch and his suite before the liturgy, as a space for welcoming the emperor as part of the ceremonial of St Sophia, and generally as a setting for important meetings or receptions.

The adjoining small sekreton was built over the ramp that gives access to the south gallery, and contained a major relic of the True Cross. The small sekreton is a vaulted room measuring c. 6 x 4.65 m (20 x 15 ft). Originally it was lit by windows on all four sides, its walls were revetted with marble, and their upper surfaces and the vault were entirely covered with mosaics. Much of the sixth-century mosaic on the vault survives in the form of luxuriant curling vine scrolls (91) around a central medallion, of which only a small fragment of the border now remains. On the four semicircular tympana below, flanking the blocked-up windows, are medallions enclosing crosses (92). Of these, only the panels on the south wall have survived.
Below the medallions it can be seen that the mosaic surface has been disturbed. Tesserae have been cut away around what were obviously inscriptions. We can reconstruct a small cross, followed by a shorter, and then by a longer word. In one case the final letters of the inscription were obliterated by picking out the dark tesserae and replacing them with others that matched the pale background (93). But the curving lines of the pale tesserae that trimmed the letters still retain the letters' distinctive shapes: ... IOC (the last a sigma, or Greek 'S'). We can even see the final two black tesserae of the foot of the preceding letter (an A, K or X). Given that there were eight medallions it seems likely that originally there were images of saints here, each inscribed ΤΟ ΑΓΙΟΣ and their name. Perhaps there were the four evangelists (including Matthew: ΜΑΤΤΗΑΟΣ), together with Peter and Paul, the Theotokos and John the Baptist. The medallion in the centre of the vault would presumably have contained an image of Christ.

It was certainly an act of iconoclasm to cut out these images of saints and to replace them with crosses, and we know precisely when and by whom the destruction of the images was ordered. According to the chronicler Theophanes, in the year 768/9 'the misnamed Patriarch Niketas scraped off the mosaic work images of the small skeleton'. According to the chronicle of Nikephoros the images were 'of the Saviour and the saints made of golden mosaic'. Neither source, however, refers to the substitution of crosses.

There is a danger that texts on Iconoclasm, and examples such as the mosaics of Nicaea or St Sophia, may be taken by a modern reader to imply the sort of systematic destruction of art throughout the Byzantine world that a police state might have organized. This certainly did not happen, as can be judged by the survival of images from earlier centuries in the church of St Demetrios (94) and other churches of Thessaloniki. (Some of the places considered in previous chapters would have escaped Iconoclasm in any case, because they were beyond Byzantine control by this date: Ravenna, for example, was captured by the Lombards in 751, and Sinai had been lost since the 630s.) Votive mosaic panels set up in the sixth and seventh
centuries to record the wishes of supplicants, who are shown accompanied by St Demetrios — whose relics the church contained — have survived unscathed. And this is despite the fact that they are close to the viewer and could easily have been destroyed (perhaps they were whitewashed over instead), unlike the mosaics set high in the dome of Hagios Georgios (which not surprisingly were also left undefaced). But a curious sidelight is cast by a story, written perhaps in the twelfth century, about the mosaic in the little church of Latomos, now called Osios David (95). The mosaic, which is in fact probably a work of the sixth century, is reputed to have been made for a daughter of the emperor Maximian (286–310), a notorious persecutor of Christians. She had it hidden to escape suspicion:

She directed her servants to bring a cowhide together with mortar and baked bricks, and she securely covered the image of the God-man [ie Christ] so as to cause it no harm.

In the reign of the iconoclast emperor Leo V (813–20), according to the account, the mosaic was miraculously revealed:

[The aged monk Senouphios] having for some reason been left alone in the church, there occurred a storm and an earthquake and, in addition, a shattering thunder-clap, so that the very foundations of the church seemed to shake. And directly the revetment of mortar and cowhide and brick that overlay, as has been said above, the sacred image of the Lord fell to the ground, and that holy figure of Christ appeared gleaming like the sun ... [The old man] cried out loudly, 'Glory be to God, I thank thee!' and he gave up his blessed soul.

There can be little doubt that the story has been woven around the rediscovery of an image carefully hidden during Iconoclasm. Quite possibly it was indeed revealed as the result of an earthquake, although there is no need to believe it happened in 813–20 (this date seems to have been chosen because it is important to the theological argument of the text). Was it merely the mosaic's proximity to the ground that led to its covering? Perhaps the little church was under the jurisdiction of an iconoclast imperial official in Thessaloniki, who felt compelled to carry out imperial policy where he could, even if
the major churches of the city were left unaltered. Yet it must remain uncertain whether the mosaic was carefully obscured so as to protect its viewers from the temptation of idolatry, or (as the story implies, and as seems more plausible) to protect it from its viewers.

The fate of icons is paralleled by the case of relics and their amuletic use during Iconoclasm. The image of Christ in his human form was at the centre of debate in Iconoclasm. His representation as a lamb, however, had already been proscribed by the pre-iconoclast Church Council of 692. The same council vigorously promoted the veneration of the cross, and banned its representation on floors, where it might be trodden on and desecrated. The image of the cross in any religious context was found to be an acceptable symbol by iconoclasts and iconophiles alike. Crosses of all sizes were set up or displayed in churches. Since at least the sixth century small crosses had also been worn, suspended like an ornament from a chain round the neck. These were called entolpia (singular entolpis), literally meaning 'on the chest'. Examples survive in museums around the world. But the years around 800 saw the development of a particular interest in the wearing of crosses that not only bore images but also contained small relics. The finest were undoubtedly those of gold with images in enamel.

The skill of firing ground glass so as to fuse it to metal was known in antiquity, but seems to have been rediscovered in the West in the late eighth century. In the cloisonné technique (French cloison: 'partition' or 'division') small strips of gold are soldered to a gold tray and then coloured ground glass is placed within the divided compartments. When fired and polished, the gold backing shines through the translucent glass, and the gold cloisons trace the outlines of figures, features, letters and so on. A key work is the enamelled reliquary cross presented to the Lateran by Pope Paschal I (r. 817-24) which is still preserved in the Vatican Museums. This cross, almost certainly made in Rome, was not intended to be worn in any way, for it measures 27 x 18 cm (10 1/4 x 7 1/4 in). Closely related to it technically, but seemingly made in Constantinople (although research currently in progress may change this view in favour of Rome), are the
Beresford Hope Cross (96–7), in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and the Fieschi-Morgan Reliquary (98) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (both are named after previous owners). Neither has an inscription revealing its donor or destination. They are traditionally considered to be among the earliest Byzantine examples of cloisonnée enamelling. The technique at this date is somewhat hesitant, and the cloisons are irregular. But over decades the craftsmanship was progressively refined and became a Byzantine speciality. Byzantine enamels were highly prized throughout the Middle Ages in East and West (as we shall see in later chapters).

The Beresford Hope Cross (shown here enlarged to twice its actual size) is hinged at the bottom to allow access to its hollow interior, which would have held one or more relics (perhaps of the True Cross). Its imagery is straightforward: a Crucifixion on the front, the Mother of God in prayer with four saints on the back. The Fieschi-Morgan Reliquary (also here enlarged to twice its actual size) is much more complex. It is constructed as a shallow box with a sliding lid. On the four sides are images of thirteen saints. On the cover is a Crucifixion framed by fourteen further saints. The inside of the front cover was also provided with images, this time in niello on silver. These are scenes from the life of Christ: the Annunciation, Nativity, Crucifixion and Anastasis (Christ’s Resurrection). When the cover is removed the interior of the box is found to be divided into compartments for relics, although none has survived. The principal relic was undoubtedly a fragment of the True Cross, and it looks as though this would have been flanked by further enamelled plaques (there are flanges to support them), and probably further relics beneath. Despite the complexity of its images and construction, the reliquary is still a small object, and holes at the top corners indicate that it was intended to be suspended on a chain and worn as an enkolpion.

In 811 Patriarch Nikephoros sent Pope Leo III a ‘gold enkolpion’ [which] has inside another enkolpion in which particles of the True Cross are inserted. Such an object could have resembled the enamelled cross reliquaries that have survived. After his deposition, Nikephoros wrote (in 818–20) of the numerous Byzantine iconophiles
Relics suffered a similar fate to images during the Iconoclast Controversy. Their veneration/worship was banned in 754, reinstated in 787, banned again in 815, and finally restored in 843. But it is much harder for us now to recover the ideas surrounding the visual display of relics – as distinct from church decoration and furnishings – because they received relatively few mentions in the texts.

In reading Byzantine sources about Iconoclasm we have to be always on our guard, for we are left with the version of events that the victorious iconophiles wished to publicize. It would hardly be surprising if they had chosen not merely to suppress certain information, but to exaggerate and embroider their side of the story. The more lurid accounts of how numerous iconophiles fell martyr to iconoclasts are likely to be later inventions. Some, however, most certainly did, and there were undoubtedly times when being a propagandist for images was highly dangerous. There is no particular reason to doubt, for example, the veracity of the main lines of the account concerning the monk-painter Lazarus, found in the continuation of Theophanes’ Chronicle:

Inasmuch as the tyrant [the emperor Theophilus, r.829-42] had resolved that all painters of sacred images should be done away with, or, if they chose to live, that they should owe their safety to having spat upon [these images], and thrown them to the ground as something unclean, and trodden on them; so he determined to bring pressure on the monk Lazarus who at that time was famous for the art of painting ... He subjected him to such severe torture that the latter’s flesh melted away along with his blood, and he was widely believed to have died.

When [Theophilus] heard that Lazarus, having barely recovered in prison, was taking up his art again and representing images of saints on panels, he gave orders that sheets of red-hot iron should be applied to the palms of his hands. His flesh was thus consumed by fire ... When [Theophilus] was informed that Lazarus was on his deathbed, he released him from prison thanks to the supplication of the empress [Theodora] ...

Despite his wounds Lazarus continued painting images.

When the Tyrant had died [in 842] and True Faith shone forth once again [after the final rejection of Iconoclasm in 843] it was he who with his own hands set up the image of the God-man Jesus Christ at the Brazen [Chalke] Gate.

Even if artists avoided torture, there were further implications to the argument over the legitimate use of images. The Iconophile Council of Nicaea in 787 established a distinction, in theory at least, between the artist’s work in interpreting the requirements of a commission, and the justification for that commission: that it represented a traditional aspect of Church activity. From this it follows that religious art, or at least its content – its iconography – could not be altered beyond certain limits. A religious image had to be recognizable for what it was.

Transgressions of this rule of decorum would not find acceptance. The following is what Abbot Theodore of Studios (d.826), a leading iconophile, wrote to a certain holy father (Theodoulos or Theodore):

They alleged that you had represented in the windows angels crucified in the form of Christ, and that both Christ and the angels were shown aged ... They said that you had done something foreign and alien to the tradition of the Church, and that this deed was inspired not by God, but surely by the Adversary [i.e. the Devil], seeing that in all the years that have passed no examples of this peculiar subject have ever been given by any one of the many holy Fathers who were inspired by God.

Even when Iconoclasm was defeated, the idea that the content of religious art should be strictly controlled remained fundamental. As we
shall see in later chapters, however, the Nicene pronouncement must be understood as acting as a restriction on artistic freedom, but not as a straitjacket compelling uniformity.

We have already seen that the final defeat of Iconoclasm in 843 did not mean the immediate redecoration of churches – indeed some, like St Irene in Constantinople, retain their iconoclast apse decoration to the present day. Portable icons were probably the first images to be reintroduced. Doubtless, images that had simply been whitewashed or obscured were cleaned. Artists, whether monks or laymen, could again execute religious images without fear. But large schemes had to wait until the financial and other circumstances were propitious, and this may have taken some decades. The best documented case of new post-iconoclast work is the apse mosaic of St Sophia itself (99).

The mosaic consists of an enthroned Theotokos and Child flanked in the presbytery vault by two archangels, of which only the southern figure is well preserved (100). Because of the huge size of the church, these figures, almost 5 m (16 ft 4 in) tall, look relatively small to the viewer on the ground. An inscription, of which only the opening and closing letters have survived, but the complete text of which is known from written sources, explains them: 'The images which the impostors [i.e. the iconoclasts] had cast down here pious emperors have again set up.' The mosaic, it is agreed, is that described as being 'newly depicted and uncovered' in a homily preached to the emperors Michael III and Basil I in St Sophia by the Patriarch Photius on Holy [Easter] Saturday, 867. In this case, however, unlike the church at Nicaea, it is not possible to establish what the apse decoration had been between the time of the church's completion in 537 and 867, or even whether the iconoclasts had in fact altered the apse mosaic in some way. The inscription thus appears to be tendentious in implying 'renewal' of the images, when inauguration or innovation of a new apse composition might well have been more accurate terms. Yet 'innovation', as we have seen, would have been totally unacceptable for religious reasons; a return to (pre-iconoclast) tradition was required.
Still in St Sophia, the room called the large sekretou was also given a new mosaic decoration at about this time (101). We are told that it had been stripped of its images by the iconoclast Patriarch Niketas in 768/9 (like the small sekretou; 92-3), but these images may not have previously been in mosaic. The decoration now survives only in fragmentary patches, but it can be discerned that images of four patriarchs of Constantinople were conspicuous among the ranks of saints. They are identifiable as Patriarchs Germanos (deposed 730), Nikephoros (deposed 815) Tarasios (held office 784–806) and Methodios (held office 843–7). The first two were removed from office by iconoclast emperors; the second two held office when iconoclast policies were overturned. It is hardly surprising that later patriarchs should have chosen to promote the iconophile credentials of their predecessors in this official space. Art had a potent propaganda value.
Perhaps the most intriguing retrospective view of Iconoclasm is provided in a manuscript known after its nineteenth-century Russian owner as the Chludov Psalter (now in the State Historical Museum in Moscow). It is a worn and damaged book, its text messily overwritten at a later date to aid legibility. The pages are laid out with very broad margins, and these were used to supply small-scale images that act as a sort of learned commentary on the words of the Psalms (a book of this type will be looked at more extensively in Chapter 7). By a subtle process of visual and verbal analogy, the illustrators of the Chludov Psalter were able to make a wide range of points, and some of these specifically concern Iconoclasm and iconoclasts.

For example, on folio 67r (102), the text has reached Psalm 68 (AV Ps 69) where in verse 21 we read: ‘They gave me also gall for my meat; and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.’ At the first level this text was taken as a prophecy of the Crucifixion, for Christ was offered vinegar and gall on the cross (see the account in Matthew 27:34, 48). The adjacent image thus shows a caricatured man lifting the vinegar-soaked sponge on a long ‘reed’ to the crucified Christ.

In the lower margin, however, the artist has supplied a further visual parallel: two iconoclasts, Patriarch John VII the Grammarian (held office 837–43) and a bishop, raise a sponge dipped in lime whitewash to a circular icon of Christ. To emphasize the connection, both whitewash and vinegar are held in similar chalice-like containers. The implication of the images is very clear: to be an iconoclast and whitewash an icon of Christ was to make yourself like the Jews who crucified him.

Many of the marginal illustrations of the Chludov Psalter show figures holding a circular image of Christ. On folio 23v (103), for example, we see the iconophile Patriarch Nikephoros holding such an icon, while below the emperor Theophilus presides over a council of bishops (the Iconoclast Council of 815), and a similar scene of whitewashing is shown at the right. The normal format for an icon, in the sense of a painting on a wooden panel, was certainly rectangular. But there may be more to the use of the circular form in this manuscript than the convenience for the artist of regarding a halo as
Also defining a medallion. Much debate in the Iconoclast Controversy centred on the circumscribability of God. All Christians believed God to be omnipresent. Therefore to circumscribe him would be to define him as being in a single place, which could be to deny his true divinity by only representing his human nature (the argument put forward by the iconoclasts). The contrary argument was that when God became man in Christ he allowed himself to be circumscribed (because Christ was truly man as well as truly God, he was present in a particular place), and therefore it was quite appropriate to represent God circumscribed in the person of Christ. In terms of images, the language of discussion has a special resonance, for in Greek the verb 'circumscribe' – perigráphi – literally means 'I draw round'. So every time an artist took up a pair of compasses to inscribe a halo or a medallion, he quite literally 'drew round' the image within. To represent Christ in a circular image was thus to argue against the iconoclasts by demonstrating God’s circumscribability.

It is not known exactly when the Chludov Psalter was made, or even in what context or for what audience – issues that are crucial to a full understanding of its images. But is is certainly a product of the period after the defeat of Iconoclasm in 843, not a work of some underground resistance movement. The proposal that it has connections with the monastery of St John of Stoudios in Constantinople has much to recommend it. The monastery’s abbot and second founder, Theodore of Stoudios (mentioned above), was a leading campaigner against the second imposition of Iconoclasm, who was exiled from the city by the emperor Leo V in 815 and regarded as a saint. The use of images in this way, however, as polemical or satirical comments on a text, is one that is known to have begun before 843.

To describe someone today as an ‘iconoclast’, or their work as ‘iconoclastic’, usually implies little more than that they have broken with the old and familiar in search of something new, exciting and different. In their desire for recognition, or dissatisfaction with what they see or hear or read, contemporary artists of all sorts may set out to be ‘iconoclasts’ in this modern sense. Although this may imply a certain aggression on their part, today’s ‘iconoclasm’ is still a
relatively cozy affair. In the Byzantine world, Iconoclasm was an altogether different and more serious matter. One further example will have to suffice. When the emperor Leo V ($813–20) ordered iconoclast slogans to be tattooed on the foreheads of the iconophile brothers Theodore and Theophanes (known later as the Graptai – 'the inscribed' – and regarded as saints), it was intended as a mark of public humiliation, not as a fashion statement.

It is often maintained that we owe our flourishing Western artistic tradition to the victory of the Byzantine iconophiles, for had Iconoclasm triumphed would not a version of the arts of Islam have prevailed? This last point seems to me overstated. Artists in western Europe had developed a vigorous tradition (or rather traditions), largely but not entirely independent of Byzantium, in the seventh and eighth centuries. We can ponder the fact that Byzantium produced no Lindisfarne Gospels or Book of Kells, or that the artistic products of the circle of Charlemagne – the first Roman emperor in the West since the fifth century – in the years around 800 are far more impressive than those emanating from Byzantium at around the same time. I do not believe that, had it not been for the arguments of St John of Damascus and the ultimately victorious Byzantine iconophiles, the visual language of western European art would have been restricted to biblical calligraphy. Nonetheless we can be pleased that when art, and ideas about art, were the subject of lengthy and bitter conflict it was the advocates of images who were victorious. Iconoclasm was never forgotten in Byzantium; indeed its defeat was celebrated annually in a special liturgy on the first Sunday in Lent, called the Sunday of Orthodoxy. Celebration seems entirely appropriate.