CHARLES BARBER, *Figure and Likeness: on the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 2002); 207p, 38 b/w pls; ISBN 0691 091773; cloth, $US42.00

It is a brave scholar who confronts a subject that has, in his own words, 'suffered from a crisis of overinterpretation' (10); and it is a mark of that scholar’s achievement that in doing so, he can be said to make an important contribution to the field. Iconoclasm, one of the most overworked areas of research in the field of Byzantine studies, nonetheless remains one of the most impenetrable. Since the publication of André Grabar’s *L'Iconoclasme byzantin: le dossier archéologique* (Paris, 1957; second revised edition, 1984) some fifty years ago, art historical discussions of iconoclasm have been conspicuously rare. At the heart of the controversy lay a fundamental disagreement over the relationship between an icon and the sacred person it represents (Christ, the Saints or the Virgin). The subsequent theological dispute over the appropriate use of icons in worship engulfed not just the Byzantine Church, but also the State for roughly a century (from 726-87 and 815-43). Hence in what has become an implicit, and routine, privileging of textual over material sources in the writing of Byzantine history, analysis and discussion of what is now termed the 'Iconoclastic Crisis' has been knit tightly to accounts of the political and theological factors, to the exclusion of the very art that provoked it. Scholarship has become increasingly enmeshed in deliberations over Iconoclasm's causes (which remain unclear), the precise date it began (the sources disagree), and the nature of the theological debates (which are in themselves difficult and complex). The art at the centre of the crisis has thus remained a silent witness to the controversy.

In tackling the subject, *Figure and Likeness* takes a seemingly audacious step away from this older model, seeking to reposition art at the centre of the discussion and presenting an alternative interpretation: that iconoclasm is primarily a matter of theology and aesthetic theory, rather than of social and political theories.
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Such an elevation of art to its rightful position alongside text in the Iconoclastic discourse was achieved in *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era* (ca 680-850): *The Sources* (Aldershot, 2001), the outcome of collaboration between an art historian (Leslie Brubaker) and historian (John Haldon). Alongside that source book, the field has still been in need of a balanced and succinct overview of what remains a difficult and confusing subject. Barber is well placed to undertake the task of furnishing such a work.

Barber has a proven track record in scholarship on aspects of Iconoclasm in which he has shown a thorough conversancy with both the textual and material evidence. *Figure and Likeness* presents the views that for many years he has been exploring and refining. In it, Barber synthesises a vast and complex body of theological material to map succinctly and clearly a developmental trajectory (as far as possible) for the evolution of icon use, making valid refinements to past arguments in the process. Although given to a thickness of expression which at times impedes the pace of the narrative, Barber’s account is coherent and his arguments authoritative and clear. The book thus provides the kind of outline to Byzantine Iconoclasm that a non-expert might find accessible, and decisively re-engages the notion of art in the discussion of the subject.

Notwithstanding Barber’s achievement, we may not agree with all he concludes. It remains to be seen, for example, whether in the next fifty years scholarship will uphold the clear distinction he perceives and carefully argues for between the meaning and functions of pre- and post-Iconoclastic images. The Patriarch of Constantinople, Nikephoros, who probably wrote in the 780s, certainly achieved a clear definition of the icon as an artefact (111), articulating for the Iconoclasts the way in which the icon and its archetype could exist as two entities: hence, Barber explains, ‘One does not destroy Christ when one destroys an icon, rather one destroys the possibility of his becoming available to vision’ (122). The demarcation between an icon and its model is clear enough, and allows the Iconophiles to define and defend a specifically
Christian art. Yet whether this reconceptualisation of the religious image as art object, as Barber interprets it, really changed the way the average Byzantine perceived Christian images is a moot point. While there is still much to learn about the art of the pre-Iconoclastic period, and the transition from early Christian to ‘Byzantine’ art in the sixth and seventh centuries, it is hard to imagine the ordinary Byzantine Christian—who according to contemporary sources was by the ninth century intensely interactive with images, talking to, embracing and weeping before them—making such intellectual distinctions between ‘art’ and ‘images’.

While the book forthrightly argues for, and does achieve, an elevation of material evidence, its own discourse is to a large extent theory-based, and its production such that the visual impact of the images is documented rather than conveyed. For instance: despite its demonstrated import as an object, there is no sense, from photograph or text, of the remarkable artistic achievement in the detailed cycle covertly painted on the inside lid of the sixth century reliquary casket from the Vatican (fig. 4), one of the most exquisite painted cycles in miniature to survive from this early date and pivotal in illustrating the development of Christian iconography; nor a sense of the immense gravitas of the Crucifixion icon painted in the chapel of Theodotus (fig. 17), one of the most critical pieces of evidence to survive for the representation of the Crucifixion in the West, and the earliest extant use of the subject behind the altar in an intimate chapel setting. The images are certainly selected with care, the quality of their reproduction is high, and it should be noted that several of Barber’s own photographs are reproduced to illustrate rarely seen but critical iconographic details discussed by the author (eg figs. 8 and 18). Yet sadly all of the images (for which the publishers frustratingly provide no listing) are in black and white. This I suspect is neither a fault of the author, nor a reflection of his intent, but a reminder of the problems besetting the art historian in the publication of monographs at the present time. With this book now in hand, we might still await a study of Byzantine Iconoclasm that does visually for the art what this author has achieved in discourse.

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