German Historical Institute London
Bulletin

Conference Report: *The Politics of Iconoclasm in the Middle Ages*

by Stephan Bruhn and Marcus Meer

The Politics of Iconoclasm in the Middle Ages. Conference organized by the German Historical Institute London in collaboration with the Warburg Institute, School of Advanced Study, University of London, and the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO), and held at the GHIL and the Warburg Institute, 1–2 Sept. 2022. Conveners: Marcus Meer (GHIL), Len Scales (Durham University), and Sarah M. Griffin (Warburg Institute).

Image-making ages always appear to be image-breaking ones as well, as Len Scales stressed in his welcome and introduction, referring to current instances of overtly political attacks on images. As such, we would expect the Middle Ages, as a decidedly visual age, to be no different. Yet existing scholarship, Scales continued, suggests that image-breaking was alien to the medieval period. Perhaps because medieval images were so often religious in content and the Middle Ages are so often viewed as an era of faith, the relative (though not absolute) lack of religiously motivated iconoclastic action throughout the Middle Ages is mistaken for proof that there was no noteworthy destruction of visual material, and certainly not for political reasons. Scales thus called for comparative and systematic research to further flesh out the topic.

This impression is reinforced because the period lies in the shadow of two peaks of image-breaking — Byzantine iconoclasm and the Reformation — which dwarf the medieval evidence for image-breakers with diverse motivations. As Leslie Brubaker (University of Birmingham) reminded us in her keynote lecture, however, the Byzantine struggle over images, looming as large in scholarship as it always has done, produced little actual iconoclasm. That term, in fact, was rarely used, and mostly in a pejorative way to delegitimize its representatives, with 'iconomachy' being the more common expression to denote the conflict. While questions of political power were involved, especially outside the Empire, what was at stake was primarily a question of representation, that is, whether Byzantine visual theory should continue to embrace the idea that images and icons can provide access to the divine, or whether it should begin to reject this. As the orthodox position ultimately triumphed, this access was guaranteed to all, elevating icons above the role for images imagined by Pope Gregory

the Great, for example. Concerning their proper place in Christian worship, he had relegated images to the realm of education for the illiterate. At the other extreme, namely the European Reformation(s), Norbert Schnitzler (formerly University of Bamberg) revisited his seminal work on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century iconoclasm and urged us to look beyond the potential of aesthetic, political, and religious motivations for iconoclastic action. Instead, he suggested, iconoclasm should be considered on its own terms, and not just as a part of other fields of historical scholarship. Much research still needs to be done, for instance, on theological conceptions of *imago* which were fundamental to medieval and early modern attitudes towards image-making and image-breaking. Schnitzler stressed that looking at iconoclasm as a historical phenomenon centred on the Reformation alone risks obscuring its medieval antecedents, which were at the heart of subsequent presentations.

One emerging thematic strand concerned the relationship between overtly religious attacks and their potentially political dimensions. Thus Matthias Hardt (GWZO) tackled the power politics of the Slavic revolts of 983 and 1066, when opposition to Ottonian and Salian rulers who sought to conquer Slavic areas also played out in the field of visual culture. Based on archaeological findings, Hardt's paper showed that sites of worship—both Christian and pagan—and their monuments, such as cult statues and reliquaries, were targeted by destructive attacks as control over territories changed. Although damaging in nature, this approach to the enemy's religious visual culture also produced new forms of imagery. Overthrown idols could be reintegrated into the victor's visual culture, as Hardt underlined with regard to cult images which are now part of Christian churches on the island of Rügen. Kateřina Horníčková (Palacký University Olomouc) explored forms of iconoclasm during the Hussite Revolution, a very diverse and long-term phenomenon which is hard to pin down. Focusing on events in Prague between 1419 and 1432, Horníčková argued that assertions of political power and moral superiority were at the heart of attacks on churches and their visual and material contents, seeking to strip the enemy of their social and religious points of reference. Images were regarded as problematic not only in theological terms, but also because they symbolized the

enemy's pride and riches, which were at odds with ideas of charity and clerical poverty. Thus iconoclastic actions in Prague were close to what Girolamo Savonarola, for instance, did in Florence. Strikingly, while attacks on representations of ecclesiastical and aristocratic figures occurred, royal symbols do not appear to have suffered the same fate. Tombs proved to be a prominent target for attacks, as Ondřej Jakubec's (Palacký University Olomouc) continuation of the story of iconoclasm during the Hussite Revolution demonstrated. Placing a sadly still current phenomenon, the desecration and vandalizing of graves, into a broader historical perspective, Jakubec argued that their conflation with the deceased's identity made it possible to extinguish the dead person's imagined 'real presence' in the collective memory as the warring factions attempted to represent—and establish—their dominance in the contested spaces. Such attempts were not limited to tombs, but extended to other representations of identity, as when the head of the Hussite leader Jan Žižka was broken off the coat of arms of the city of Tábor, mounted above the city's gate, in around 1516. Like Hardt, Jakubec also discussed cases of adaptation, in which monuments were preserved and acquired a new meaning.

The variety of the material targets of iconoclastic action made up a second thematic strand of the conference. Samuel K. Cohn (University of Glasgow) found attacks on similar objects in urban revolts in Renaissance Italy. In addition to the famous example of the Medici arms, which were 'purged' from Florence in 1527, chronicles and court records reveal iconoclasm as a popular strategy to reclaim spaces occupied by symbols that signalled (former) powers. These included statues such as that of Pope Julius II, which was decapitated and its head given to children as a plaything during an uprising in Bologna in 1511. Besides these show trials of visual representations, another form of iconoclasm mainly driven by social class was the exclusion of 'lower' people from the commission and display of artworks in the urban space. Marcus Meer (GHIL) likewise focused on cities as stages for an extensive repertoire of anti-visual expressions of discontent, which ranged from defacement and destruction to the replacement of contentious images and objects in conflicts fought in English-speaking and German-speaking cities. Meer stressed that any visual, material object could become the target of iconoclastic action if it was ascribed

with a meaning that related to questions of power and embodied a sense of identity, including the Perron of Liège, a monument that was 'abducted' by Charles the Bold and sent to Ghent in 1467.

Jan Dumolyn and Jeroen Deploige (Ghent University) argued in their presentation that other landmarks ascribed and conflated with notions of identity became targets of iconoclastic action, as the *droit d'arsin/droit d'abbatis* in Flemish cities of the high and late Middle Ages illustrate. Whether as an official punishment or a weapon in feuds and revolts, under these laws houses were defaced or destroyed to hammer home statements about their owners. These acts often went hand in hand with other forms of punishment, such as exile or confiscation. Kate Heard (Royal Collection Trust) drew attention to yet another material example in her investigation of the theft and destruction of vestments. Instances of damaging, stealing, and confiscating vestments in late medieval England suggest that they had a purpose beyond their use in divine services. Besides their potentially immense monetary value, liturgical vestments also pointed towards the office of their users and donors, so that repeated instances of damaging bishops' mitres can be read as attacks on a sartorial symbol of power and the person wielding it, as accusations against rebel leader Wat Tyler in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, for example, suggest. Many of the paraments in question were essential requisites for liturgical services, so that infringing upon their use could prevent their rightful owners from celebrating mass properly.

Gerald Schwedler (Kiel University) looked at the *damnatio memoriae* of Emperor Louis IV (1282–1347) imposed by adversaries of the House of Wittelsbach, who attempted not only to destroy visual representations but also to prevent media from shaping political discourse, erasing texts issued by him or relating to him. Such 'graphoclasms', Schwedler argued, should be added to a larger conceptual understanding of 'negative media policies' that sought to control the reproduction of memory. Dyan Elliott (Northwestern University) traced one such policy from Pope Stephen VI's moves against his predecessor Pope Formosus to the eleventh-century age of church reform, focusing on the role of the corpse in struggles for papal authority. In the case of Formosus, the *damnatio* not only took the form of removing his name from inscriptions and destroying

statues, but also led to the infamous Cadaver Synod of 897, which saw the deceased pope exhumed and put on trial for alleged abuses. Here, Elliott argued, the human cadaver served as a template for delineating interaction between the holy and the unholy. The treatment of another deceased opponent inspired the presentation by Martin Bauch (GWZO). He suggested that the absence of visual and material trappings from performative settings in a wider sense can be seen as a political and iconoclastic attack on predecessors insofar as they also dismantled the 'image' of a king. While Günther XXI of Schwarzburg (1304–49) was afforded a funeral by his victorious competitor for the Roman–German throne, the deceased Charles IV was conspicuously denied the rites and location typical of the burial of a king. This reinvention and adaptation was necessary to put an end to Günther's illegitimate reign, for he had not formally renounced his claim while still alive. In this regard, Bauch, Elliott, and Schwedler echoed a point raised by Cohn, who had suggested that top-down moves against commemorative art commissioned by peasants and burgesses in urban churches were a kind of manipulation of the visual for the purpose of socio-political exclusion.
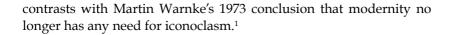
Parallel to material diversity, a third emerging thematic strand concerned questions surrounding the ambiguity of iconoclastic actions. Lorenz Hindrichsen (Copenhagen International School) observed that illuminations in manuscripts that depict non-White figures often show marks of partial or complete erasure, pointing to a fundamental change in the perception of skin colour and attitudes towards race in the fifteenth century. Turbans, for example, seem to have provoked hostile, exclusionary reactions, although other interpretations are possible. Erasure might also result from excessive touching, in an inclusionary attempt to engage in acts of 'tactile worship' of venerated non-White figures such as St Maurice. Indeed, it is known that people ate manuscripts in order to — rather literally — internalize their sacred contents, which Hindrichsen suggests seeing as 'iconoclashes' in the sense proposed by the late Bruno Latour rather than as 'iconoclasms'. Allie Terry-Fritsch (Bowling Green State University) took up the question of equivocation and consumption as she explored the eating of food decorations made for banquets. In a cultural context that celebrated the Eucharistic host, other food items also served as

icons that pointed indexically to a referent and captured the essential quality of what they represented. The iconoclasm involved in food consumption, it was suggested, should be seen as a creative, performative process that placed those taking part in banquets (as well as in divine services) into a dynamic relationship with each other, which was essential for the construction of community.

The medievalists' perspective in the preceding presentations was contrasted with a closing round-table discussion involving Brubaker, an expert on the Byzantine period, and two art historians with early modern and modern interests respectively, Ludmilla Jordanova (Durham University) and Arnold Bartetzky (GWZO). All three noted the clear interdisciplinary interest shown by medieval historians and their pursuit of microhistories, but questioned whether either 'politics' or 'iconoclasm' were suitable terms for future research. They rightly pointed out that medievalists are often at pains to stress that 'politics' cannot divest itself from 'religion' in the Middle Ages (and perhaps not even now), so that the interconnections between religious and political motivations must not be artificially severed, as Horníčková and Jakubec argued, for example. As the presentations demonstrated, the term 'iconoclasm' fails to encompass the wide range of targets discussed, which went beyond images and statues to include various visual and material representations of individuals and institutions—anything that, as Jordanova stressed regarding the example of portraiture, was seen to stand for 'something more than itself'. But using the term 'iconoclasm' might also risk reducing to practices of breaking what in fact also included practices of defacing, replacing, and censoring. Another problem with the term is its pejorative use to vilify the motives of those who engaged in it; as all three discussants stressed, it has produced an ill-advised focus in scholarship and in public debate on whether a specific act of iconoclasm can be regarded as justified or not. What these forms of opposition and violence towards visual material had in common, however, as Brubaker highlighted, was not only the fact that something always remains—whether broken fragments or a conspicuous gap—but also a shared intention to shape the past, present, and future through decisions concerning what may be allowed to be visible. This testifies to the hold that 'the visual' still has on people, as Bartetzky stressed, and

contrasts with Martin Warnke's 1973 conclusion that modernity no longer has any need for iconoclasm.[1]

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[1] Martin Warnke, 'Bilderstürme', in id. (ed.), *Bildersturm: Die Zerstörung des Kunstwerks* (Munich, 1973), 7–13, at 7–8.