Iconoclasm and monachomachy as mimetic conflicts through the *Life of Stephen the Younger*

MA Thesis

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Abstract

The Byzantine Empire faced prolonged turmoil during the eighth and ninth centuries due to the iconoclastic movement, denounced as heretical by its opponents. Imperial enforcement of icon destruction occurred in two phases, separated by an interlude that resorated the icon veneration under Empress Irene and patriarch Tarasios. The *Life of Stephen the Younger*, composed during this interim, recounts Emperor Leo III's persecution of iconophile monks. Scholarly debates persist over what caused iconoclasm — often tied to *monachomachy*—, yet scarce and biased sources complicate any attempt of analysis. This study employs René Girard's mimetic theory —centered on religion's relationship to violence and sacrality— to offer new insights on the *Life of Stephen the Younger*. By framing iconoclasm as a sacrificial crisis and scapegoating mechanism, the analysis reveals how hagiographical narratives of holiness and persecution reinforced Christian communal identity amid imperial-religious tensions.

Keywords

Byzantine Iconoclasm, *Life of Stephen the Younger*, mimetic theory, violence, monasticism, hagiography.

Contents

1. Introduction

a. Questions surrounding the *Life of Stephen the Younger*

Religious experience throughout the Byzantine Empire was deeply influenced by power dynamics, authority and material concerns, paralleling contemporary realities. The *Life of Stephen the Younger* (BHG 1666) exemplifies this in a comprehensive and nuanced manner. The text's structure and the questions it provokes provide a basis for investigating whether hagiography was exclusively a literary form or whether it also harbored underlying, possibly strategic, intentions from civil or ecclesiastical institutions. Written by Stephen the Deacon, this text recounts the life of Stephen the Younger, a monk residing on Mount Auxentios near Constantinople during the extensive and impactful reign of Constantine V (718-775), also referred to as Copronymos or Caballinus in different sources (Gero, 1977, 169-175; Martin, 1930, 40). The author remains a somewhat enigmatic figure. His name is recorded in the title of the work in ten manuscripts from diverse traditions, each of which also note his role as a deacon of the Great Church of Hagia Sophia (Auzépy, 2016, 6). Although details about him are scarce, the text has been consistently ascribed to him.

Scholarly debate persists regarding its precise date of composition, with proposals centering on either 807 or 809. This discrepancy arises from conflicting evidence: the internal chronology of the text itself versus the dates provided by contemporary chroniclers. The *Life* includes information about its composition, which may have been 42 years after the martyrdom of Stephen.[1] While the sources initially appear concordant, a critical divergence emerges upon closer examination. The *Life*'s internal chronology asserts that Stephen the Younger died at age 53 on 28 November.[2] The first chapters narrate how he was born a few days earlier than Germanos' accession to the patriarchal throne[3] on 11 August 715, as dated by Theophanes (de Boor, 1883, 384-385; Turtledove, 1982, 80). Based on this cross-reference, the martyr's death would have occurred in 767, placing the composition of the text in 809. However, according to this same chronicler, the martyrdom took place on November 20, 765 (de Boor, 1883, 436–437; Turtledove, 1982, 125), which would date the text to 807, forty-two years later.

[1] For the Greek text, consult Auzépy (2016, 89). The French translation appears on page 180 of the same edition, with footnote 5 offering particularly salient commentary.
[2] For Greek: Auzépy, 2016, 171-172. For French: Auzépy, 2016, 271. With particular attention to footnotes 438 and 439.
[3] For Greek: Auzépy, 2016, 94-95. For French: Auzépy, 2016, 185-186.

The most plausible chronology appears to be the internal one, that is, the one placing the composition in 809, as it is closest to the event being described and relies exclusively on a single external datum: the date of patriarch Germanos' accession (Auzépy, 2016, 8). In any case, the choice bears little to no impact on the main argument. Both proposed dates fall within the turbulent period between the death of Tarasios in 806 and the appointment and subsequent abdication of patriarch Nikephoros in 815.

The period of iconoclasm is widely regarded as one of the most significant and complex chapters in Christian history, since it shows a "blustering inconclusive character" (Brown, 1973, 26). It is commonly divided into two phases: the first beginning with the reign of Leo III (r. 717–741) and continuing until the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the Second Council of Nicaea (787). This council restored the veneration of icons with the support of Empress Irene (750/756–803) and patriarch Tarasios (c. 730–806). The Nicaean canons formally annulled the legitimacy of the Council of Hieria (754), which was henceforth deemed non-ecumenical and heretical, as it was composed entirely of iconoclast bishops. The interval between the two iconoclastic phases is often referred to as the "first restoration of icons" and is characterized by a period of relative "moderation and neutrality" (Martin, 1930, 150–151).

Following the death of Tarasios, Nikephoros (c. 758–815) assumed the patriarchate of Constantinople as an iconodule, a move that provoked strong opposition from the monastic clergy. This resistance was led by Theodore Stoudite (759-826) and his uncle, Plato of Sakkoudion, a former patriarchal advisor, both of whom were imprisoned and exiled by the eponymous Emperor Nikephoros I (r. 802–811) (Alexander, 1958, 69–71). Following a series of military revolts, patriarch Nikephoros crowned Leo V, known as "the Armenian" (r. 813–820). However, their relationship did not unfold as anticipated: in 815, the Emperor forced Nikephoros to abdicate and officially reintroduced iconoclasm, thereby marking the generally accepted beginning of the second phase of iconoclasm.

The sources from this period are not only scarce but also exhibit a pronounced ideological bias by the so-called "orthodox" faction (Brubaker & Haldon, 2001, xxii). It is likely that iconoclastic sources were either destroyed or, at the very least, not copied to the same extent as other writings due to their classification as "heretical". This may

have been one of the consequences of the so-called "Triumph of Orthodoxy" (ODB: *s. v.).* As has often been noted, the designation of heresy functioned as a constructed category to delineate and marginalize perceived otherness (Cameron, 2008, 103–104), effectively turning dissenting groups into blasphemous and pointing at a determined scapegoat (Brown, 1973, 23). Whether the creation of these "heterodoxies" served merely as a pretext for persecuting marginal movements, or whether the imposition of a singular orthodoxy was intended to extinguish a broader plurality of religious identities, remains unclear. Scholars have examined both the general and particular political implications of this dynamic, though their conclusions should not be taken as definitive, implying concepts such as power struggle, material conditions, identity, or holiness, among others (Alexander, 1977; Brown, 1973; Dagron, 2003; Jones, 1959; Kaldellis, 2007).

What can be asserted with some confidence is that these developments were closely linked to a form of religious authoritarianism. Nonetheless, our understanding of these issues —particularly in relation to heresy— is inevitably shaped by the nature of the sources. This suggests a deliberate effort to impose homogeneity and consolidate authority, once again highlighting the pervasive presence of power struggles in every facet of human life. In light of this, it becomes more understandable that the primary historical sources for the eighth and ninth centuries consist largely of Theophanes' *Chronography*[4] (818); patriarch Nikephoros' *Breviarium* (780), among other of his works; the letters of Theodore Stoudite (Fatouros, 1991) and his published writtings; and a number of hagiographical texts among which the *Life of Stephen the Younger* emerges as one of the most significant.[5]

The context in which the *Life* —the subject of this study— was composed corresponds, in any case, to the very beginning of Nikephoros' patriarchate and predates the second phase of Iconoclasm by a few years. It may well have functioned as an ideological or propagandistic instrument, commissioned and circulated with the aim of discrediting a form of iconoclasm that was not yet fully extinguished —a common

[4] The present thesis will include references to the main critical edition of the Chronography (de Boor, 1883), and to two English translations of the text, one complete (Mango, Scott, 1997) and one partial (Turtledove, 1982).

[5] Before each chapter of his work, Martin provides a useful list of the sources that cover the topic o the period of that section (1930). Also, further details about the main sources can be found at the survey offered by Brubaker and Haldon (2001).

strategy during periods of theological and political instability (Alexander, 1977, 262-263). Following the Second Council of Nicaea, iconoclasm was by no means defeated (Alexander, 1958, 111-113), as Theophanes himself attests on several occasions.[6] Even a cursory examination of textual production from the period reveals a substantial number of works dedicated to refuting iconoclastic doctrine—an effort that would have been unnecessary had the movement truly ceased to exist.

Although the faction opposing sacred images lost its political dominance for several decades, it did not lose its ideological foothold within Byzantine society. On the contrary, the iconoclastic movement experienced a period of renewed vitality, coinciding with a noticeable decline in the use of icons in local cultic practices (Brown, 1973, 26-27), a growing disillusionment with the notion of the Byzantines as the "chosen people" (Bravo García, 1999, 93), and the increasingly centralizing tendencies of imperial policy following the fifth century (Brown, 1973, 21-22). A clear indication of this lingering iconoclastic impact is that, in 786, Empress Irene was compelled to replace the capital's garrison —composed of former iconoclast sympathizers— in order to convene the iconodule council (Martin, 1930, 92), thereby ensuring a favorable environment for the restoration of image worship. This resistance extended beyond the garrison to include the *scholarii* and other military themes, reflecting a broader base of support for iconoclast ideology within the army.

Apparently, the iconodule ruling faction did not initiate a campaign of retaliatory persecution against their iconoclastic opponents. Instead, they reserved punishments —such as the death penalty or forced baptism— for other groups deemed heretical or impious, including the Paulicians, the Athinganoi, and the Jews (Alexander, 1977, 245). During this period of coexistence and the gradual mending of hostilities, a new orthodoxy was in the process of being established. The composition and possible commission of the *Life of Stephen the Younger* were by no means unrelated to this objective. Auzépy highlights the text's role in rehabilitating the image of a certain

[6] Theophanes recounts an episode in 813, during the reign of Emperor Michael I and the patriarchate of Nikephoros, in which a group of iconoclasts entered the Church of the Holy Apostles during prayer and prostrated themselves at the tomb of Constantine V, imploring him to rise and defend the empire in its time of need. According to the chronicler, Constantine's body miraculously rose, mounted a horse, and repelled the Bulgarians. However, Theophanes also describes the subsequent trial and punishment of those involved, who were accused by the city prefect of orchestrating a fraudulent miracle. He identifies the perpetrators as Paulicians and denounces Constantine V as "Jewish-minded" (de Boor, 1883, 501; Turtledove, 1982, 179-180).

women's monastery on Mount Auxentios named Trikhinareai, which may have previously supported iconoclasm and later repented, a narrative that aligns with broader efforts to reconstruct a unified and purified religious memory.

At the beginning of the text, although several names are mentioned, the commissioner of the work appears to be a certain Epiphanios, the presbyter and hegumen.[7] His role in the composition of the work does not become fully evident until the very end, where Stephen the Deacon refers to him as ὁ καὶ πρὸς τὸ τοιόνδε ἐγχείρημα ἐπιτάξας[8] (Auzépy, 2016, 175). According to the arguments presented by Auzépy, this Epiphanios was likely the head of a monastery located on this mountain visible from Constantinople that had become a sacred site and a center of monastic life, and named after the saint Auxentios. The *Life of Auxentios* (BHG 199) provides the earliest indications of the foundation of a monastery primarily intended for women, although it also appears to have admitted men. Alongside the *Life of Bendemianos* (BHG 272), it offers valuable testimony regarding other monastic constructions associated with this site (Auzépy, 2016, 11-12).

The most interesting monastery for the study of the *Life of Stephen the Younger* is Trikhinareai with no hesitation. Marie-France Auzépy proposed a consistent theory around this monastery from its importance within the text itself, particularly through the fact that Anna, a nun from this center, appears as a secondary character and is judged and martyrized by the same Constantine V.[9] Moreover, the monastery functioned as a significant intellectual center, fostering the composition of the said *Life of Auxentios* by one of its members in a notably refined literary style. It also housed the saint's tomb and, according to later sources, remained active until the twelfth century (Auzépy, 2016, 15-16). The martyrdom of Anna occupies a significant place in the narrative, not only in its development,[10] but also in the conclusion of the work.[11] She is

[7] From this point onward, certain references to the *Life of Stephen the Younger* may correspond directly to the appendix at the end of the present study, where the reader will find the Greek text as published in Auzépy's edition, accompanied by an English translation of the selected passages. Bibliographical citations will appear in both the main body and the appendix to facilitate cross-reference and consultation. For the present case, see Appendix: Text 1 (p. 63). Greek text: Auzépy, 2016, 87; French translation: Auzépy, 2016, 179.

[8] My translation: "the one who commissioned such an enterprise". For the French version, see Auzépy, 2016, 275.

[9] Greek text: Auzépy, 2016, 133-136; French translation: Auzépy, 2016, 228-231. Also, see Appendix: text 13 (pp. 73-74).

[10] See Appendix: Text 14 (pp. 74-75).

[11] Chapter 76. Greek text: Auzépy, 2016, 174-175; French translation: Auzépy, 2016, 274-275.

presented as a disciple of Stephen who embraced monastic life after renouncing all her material possessions and joining a female monastic community on Mount Auxentios,[12] later identified as the Trikhinareai. Stephen's role as hegumen of this women's monastery is particularly noteworthy, as he is not portrayed as the founder of a mixed-gender community —something explicitly forbidden by the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. In this regard, the *Life* demonstrates a clear commitment to iconodule canon law, possibly at the expense of historical accuracy.

Nevertheless, the most compelling aspect of the mention of this monastery in the *Life* lies in the edict issued by Constantine V in 763, during the period of monastic persecution, commonly referred to as the *monachomachy*. The *Life* refers directly to the central command of this edict: "if anyone is discovered approaching the Mount Auxentios, they shall suffer the punishment of the sword".[13] It may have applied exclusively to the monasteries founded by the saint himself, and probably had no bearing on women's communities such as the monastery of Trikhinareai. This exception appears inconsistent with the Emperor's seemingly absolute opposition to monastic life as a whole. Other passages in the *Life* seem to underscore the orthodoxy of the monasteries perhaps a little too emphatically,[14] suggesting a possible apologetic or corrective intention behind the narrative.

In light of these and other considerations, Auzépy concludes that the alleged commissioner of the *Life*, Epiphanios, may have been a figure of orthodox authority whose involvement ensured the fulfillment of a dual purpose, serving two distinct institutional interests. On the one hand, the text could have functioned as a propagandistic tool for the patriarchate during a period of political and theological turbulence, reinforcing its stance against iconoclasm. On the other hand, the monastery of Trikhinareai may have required a form of symbolic purification for its previous alignment with iconoclastic policies, making the *Life* an ideal vehicle for rehabilitating its image under the newly established orthodoxy. "C'est," —she argues— "dans l'état de nos connaissances, le premier example de Vie de saint produite pour

[12] See Appendix: Text 6 (p. 68).
[13] See Appendix: Text 16 (p. 76).
[14] See Appendix: text 5 (pp. 67-68).

donner à une institution qui avait suivi les directives isauriennes un passé conforme à l'orthodoxie nicéene" [15] (Auzépy, 2016, 18-19).

This is particularly relevant given that the controversy during these years centered on the need to establish a specific code of conduct regarding those who had failed to remain orthodox in the face of iconoclastic persecution, a debate that prominently involved both the actions and theoretical contributions of Theodore Stoudite (Alexander, 1977, 250–251). Nevertheless, the behavior of monastic centers does not evince a radical or unified opposition to iconoclasm (Gero, 1997, 242), although the center of Stoudios offered an uncompromised resistance to this movement. After the first restoration of icons (787), the general policy of the rigorist monastic movement often opposed proposals put forward by the patriarchate because the latter was evidently influenced by the imperial court.

In the aforementioned case of the Paulician heresy, it has already been noted that Theodore the Stoudite rejected the application of the death penalty, arguing that heretics should be granted the opportunity to repent. Nevertheless, he also called for the maintenance of strict boundaries —such as refraining from sharing communion or meals with them— as evidenced in one of his letters (Fatouros, 1992a, 175-176). At the Council of Nicaea, another Stoudite named Sabas and a certain Theoctistos opposed the leniency of Tarasios towards the *lapsi* who had embraced iconoclasm (Alexander, 1958, 80-81), also noticed by another of Theodore's letters (Fatouros, 1992a, 109): "οἱ [Σάβας καὶ Θεοκτίστος] μὲν γὰρ ἕνεκεν τοῦ μὴ προσδεχθῆναι τοὺς ἐκ τῆς εἰκονομαχικῆς αἱρέσεως ὑποστρέφοντας ἐπισκόπους εἰς τοὺς οἰκείους βαθμοὺς (καὶ οὐ πάντας, ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἐξόχους καὶ πρωτάρχους τῆς αἱρέσεως, κατὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ Ἁγίου Ἀθανασίου) ἐνίσταντο, ὅπερ οὐκ ἀπεικότως".[16]

The Simoniac controversy marked yet another point of schism between the secular and regular clergy from its very inception. It originated with monastic communities denouncing bishops who had allegedly engaged in the sale of liturgical

[15] I offer a free translation: "This is, to the best of our knowledge, the very first example of a Saint's Life composed with the aim of furnishing a past aligned with Nicene iconodule orthodoxy, for an institution that had followed Isaurian iconoclastic directives"

[16] "They [Sabas and Theoctistos] insisted that bishops returning from the iconoclastic heresy should not be admitted to their sees, but not with regard to all of them, but (only) the prominent ones and the originators of the heresy, according to the word of St. Athanasius. That was not unreasonable", translation by Alexander (1958, 81).

and sacred objects during the first period of iconoclasm. After 787, the issue resurfaced not only as a means to punish financially motivated iconoclastic bishops but also as a way to expose widespread corruption among members of the secular clergy (Alexander, 1958, 81-82). This phenomenon was closely tied to the decline of icon veneration in Asia Minor, a well-documented trend that had begun nearly a century earlier. It was not merely the consequence of specific iconoclastic measures or policies, but rather the result of sustained Christian contact with Arab invasions and the corresponding erosion of civic patriotism rooted in local relics, icons, and saints' patronage (Brown, 1973, 26). In response, civil officials and bishops sought to capitalize on this decline by liquidating ecclesiastical assets.

Following the deposition of Empress Irene in 790, patriarch Tarasios declared that he would refrain from holding communion with anyone he knew to be a Simoniac. Once again, in 806, prior to the election of Nicephoros as patriarch, Theodore addressed the namesake Emperor, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a clear separation between ἡ κοσμικὴ ἀρχή, that is, the secular power, and ἡ κατὰ τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ἡγεμονία, the hegemony within the Church (Fatouros, 1992b, 46). Nevertheless, Theodore may have drawn two key conclusions from this situation. First, the necessity of *de-secularizing* religious authority, perhaps through the election of a resolute candidate capable of resisting the crown's attempts to override dogmatic prerogatives, as it had occurred in several occasions before. Second, he may have perceived the urgency of unifying the ecclesiastical front by consolidating a strong monastic opposition to iconoclasm, a threat that continued to loom in the background.

Iconoclasm, as a movement, was inherently opposed to the veneration of sanctity in both objects and individuals, that is, in icons and saints. Some scholars have even described monastic communities as holding a "monopoly of sanctity" (Auzépy, 2016, 38), although offering a more democratized access to holiness in contrast to the institutionalized consecration promoted by iconoclastic doctrine. According to this doctrine, only the Eucharist, the building of a church, and the cross were considered sacred, as their sanctity derived from priestly mediation, objects elevated to supernatural status through clerical action and divine assent (Brown, 1973, 5).

From this perspective, monastic orders appear as natural adversaries of the iconoclasts, given their potential status as holy men and women, prospective saints or

"living icons". However, as has already been noted, monastic responses to iconoclastic policies were far from homogeneous. The reaction within the monastic community was more nuanced and complex, reflecting a spectrum of positions rather than a uniform stance. As Gero has pointed out, the association between monastic spirituality and the rejection of materiality in certain ascetic circles closely aligned with the theological premises of iconoclasm. Furthermore, some sources suggest that iconoclasm may have originated, at least in part, within monastic communities in Armenia (Gero, 1997, 244-245).

It is evident that the secular clergy, driven by political considerations and the need to maintain favorable relations with the imperial authorities, was often more willing to compromise, at times, arguably, beyond what orthodoxy would permit. Monastic clergy had historically been more inclined to challenge the religious authority of both the secular clergy and imperial power (Dagron, 2003, 224-225), on the grounds that monasticism was meant to be situated outside political power structures and on the margins of community, although often benefitted by the ecclesiastical wealth. The Stoudite faction adopted a far less flexible stance in cases like that of Joseph of Kathara, the clerk who officed the second marriage of Constantine VI in the so-called Moechian Controversy (Alexander, 1958, 82-85).[17]

This affair initially led to the exile of Plato of Saccudion and Theodore of Stoudios, but it later resurfaced under Emperor Nicephoros. Although the precise motivations remain unclear, the Emperor instructed the newly appointed patriarch Nicephoros to reinstate Joseph in 806, thereby reviving a longstanding controversy within the Church. Among the explanations proposed in scholarly literature, two stand out as particularly compelling and mutually reinforcing. The first, advanced by Bury and cited by Alexander (1958, 86), suggests that the Emperor aimed to assert "the superiority of the

[17] In 781 Irene negotiated a betrothal between her son and Rotrud (775-810), Charlemagne's daughter. However, due to changing political dynamics, the betrothal and the accompanying diplomatic efforts were abandoned (Alexander, 1958, 82). Irene then secured a politically advantageous marriage for her son with Maria of Amnia (770-823), the granddaughter of saint Philaretos (c. 7th-8th century). In 795, while co-ruling with his mother Irene, Constantine VI divorced Maria, whom he compelled to become a nun, and married Theodote, a κουβικουλαρία (lady-in-waiting) of the Empress (de Boor, 1883, 470; Turtledove, 1982, 152-153). This movement was considered not only illegal, but specifically an impious action secured by the social status of the players involved, as it can be drawn from the *Life of Tarasios* (BHG 1698) (Efthymiadis, 2016, 188): "he [Constantine] considered his own opinion as much more just than written legal documents". The emperor's second marriage sparked a major conflict within the clergy. Joseph of Kathara, the clerk who had officed this second marriage, and Theophanes the chronicler sided with the patriarch, as did the majority of the clergy.

Emperor to canonical law", thereby provoking a direct conflict between ecclesiastical and imperial authority. The second, derived from the *Synodicum Vetus*, emphasizes Joseph's role in helping to resolve the revolt of Bardanes Turcus in 803, implying that his reinstatement may have been an act of imperial gratitude (Alexander, 1958, 86–87).

This is a faithful example of the role of religious power in this context, in every case subordinated to that of the Emperor and trying to excel or gain independece. Caesaropapism is a well known mechanism that several emperors have displayed during their reigns, and it consists in absorbing the religious authority from secular clergy, trying to create a completely centralizing figure that not only would be able to promote civil laws, but also to establish religious dogma and issue canons (Dagron, 2003, 282-295). This is exactly what happened during the two iconoclastic periods, when the emperors determined religious policy through cohertion and military force, neglecting the opposition of the opposing ecclesiastical leaders. Allegedly, certain previously mentioned events threatened the *de facto* hegemony of the Byzantine Empire and cast doubt on its perceived role as the "chosen people". This shift necessitated a theological explanation for the apparent change in divine favor. In response, the emperors, supported by segments of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, interpreted the situation as the result of a "national apostasy", facilitated by what they saw as an ineffective and compromised Church (Brown, 1973, 25).

Before the outbreak of iconoclasm, there was a drop in confidence regarding the hegemony and the claimed universalism of the Eastern Roman Empire, also known as Byzantium, who claimed to be the "true [people of] Israel" (Brown, 1973, 24). It is important to acknowledge a prevailing Western bias in scholarship, as modern academia routinely refers to these populations as "Byzantines", despite the fact that they consistently identified themselves as "Romans", Ῥωμαῖοι. The reception of this part of the Roman civilization was definitely downplayed by a romanticising view according to which the Roman legacy was exclusively Western and Latin (Kaldellis, 2007, 43). While the name of Rome evokes a glorious past, maintaining the older name of Constantinople, that is, Byzantium, seemed to deny its evolution. In addition to this translongitudinal conflict, the "new Romans" believed themselves to be the universal chosen people (Bravo García, 1999, 93) and heirs of the Empire that brought Christianity to its brightest moment. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, social insurrections,

theological disputes, and other potentially theophanical events defied this ideal.[18] Moreover, military loss was not unknown for them after the expansionism of the Bulgarians, the Arab Caliphate and the Lombards, mainly (Martin, 1930, 8).

Iconodule sources often relate the iconoclastic policy to some specific "heretic" reasoning influenced by Muslim and Jewish thought. Some legends propose a sort of magician or counselor of Jewish origin or with "saracen ideals" (de Boor, 1884, 402; Turtledove, 1982, 93-94). As Theophanes himself mentions, these legends refer to a particular event that will be introduced and analyzed in the following paragraphs. However, before proceeding, it is necessary to caution the reader against a common misconception. While it may seem intuitive, early Islamic doctrine should not be classified as inherently iconoclastic, but rather as traditionally iconophobic (Sahner, 2017, 51-53).

Similarly, Christian liturgy was not immune to such classifications. Paraphrasing André Grabar's timely observation, Brown notes that "some of the greatest shrines of the Byzantine period, most notably the Hagia Sophia itself, would have struck any eighth-century worshipper as almost entirely aniconic. Even if we accept the iconodule argument, that icons had come to stay, we must think of their presence in the churches as more atomized, as less integrated in the overall decoration and meaning of the building than in later centuries" (Brown, 1973, 10). The predisposition of eastern Byzantines and the semitic peoples was to avoid figural representation, even outside religion and cult (Grunebaum, 1962, 6-7). The available sources indicate that "long before Islam there was a strong tendency among certain groups of Christians in the Near East to adopt non-figurative motifs in their churches", and consequently it is untenable to interpret Islam as the primary cause of iconoclastic tendencies in Christian religious art (King, 1985, 276).

Furthermore, the iconoclastic tendencies of Christianity had been witnessed since its very beginning, which leads to many scholars to actively deny the validity of "orthodox" arguments, accepting that iconoclasm was not a foreign influence, nor an un-Byzantine dull and empty period (Lemerle, 1971, 106-107), but rather a new eruption

[18] Not coincidentally, Theophanes testifies an earthquake (σεισμός) in Palestine and a sign (σημεῖον) or apparition (δοκίτης) in the southern sky, sword-shaped (ξιφοειδής), and lasting for thirty days, predicting the Arab conquest (de Boor, 1883, 336; Turtledove, 1982, 37). Also, the volcanic eruptions of Thera and Therasia are also mentioned as signs from God, after which "Leo deduced that God was angry at him" (Turtledove, 1982, 97).

of an ancient conflict within Christian hellenistic theology —a thesis widely accepted in modern scholarship (Alexander, 1958, 9; Brown, 1973, 1-2; Florovsky, 1950, 95-96; Grunebaum, 1962, 3-4).

On the other side of the border, the Arab Caliphate witnessed an iconoclastic edict by the caliph Yazid II (687-724) around 723.[19] The fact is that this unprecedented policy was apparently a part of a larger campaign against Christianity, which included the killing of white dogs, doves, cocks, and blue-eyed people (Sahner, 2017, 27-28). Nevertheless, it could not reach a further development due to Yazid's early death, for it was revoked instantly by his successor Hisham (Grunebaum, 1962, 2) and generally silenced by Arabic sources (King, 1985, 270), which is relatively shocking in comparison to the abundance of mentions in Greek, Armenian and especially Syriac sources. It is also relevant to point out that Muslim sources generally construct the narration about Yazid's reign as a bad period (Sahner, 2017, 34).

So, since this iconoclastic prosecution occurred first, the Christian "orthodoxy" could easily consider it the source of an external evil that reached the Byzantine people. After a brief exposition about Yazid's edict and the interference of a Jewish magician who influenced the caliph, Theophanes mentions a certain Beser, "a former Christian who had been taken captive in Syria who had abjured the Christian faith and become imbued with Arab doctrines" (de Boor, 1883, p. 414; Mango and Scott, 1997, p. 555). The relation between the magician and Beser is evident: both influenced a ruler and played a role in the promotion of iconoclasm. Other testimonies, such as the categorical works of patriarch Nicephorus and some interventions of the Acta of the Second Council of Nicaea, also point out that Leo was influenced by one or two Jewish magicians (Starr, 1933, p. 501; Alexander, 1958, pp. 6-7).

This mechanism of constructing alterity has been extensively employed throughout Christian ecclesiastical and political history. The very existence of

[19] There's a debate over the date of this edict and its application. The main study from the last century on this topic (Vasiliev, 1956, 45-47) proposes, based on Greek sources —mainly the account of John of Jerusalem in the *Acta* of the aforementioned II Council of Nicaea (Sahner, 2017, 12-13 and 26), the earliest Byzantine source— that the edict was promulgated two and a half years before the death of the caliph, therefore in 721. Others, as Bowersock and Sahner, privileged earlier Syriac testimonies —for instance, the Chronicle of Zuqnin (775)—, but also took into account Arabic texts like the *Wulat Misr* by al-Kindi (961), or the detailed chronology of the *Chronographia* by Theophanes, according to which the caliph died less than a year after the application of the edict, that is 724, so it wouldn't have been published till 723 (Sahner, 2017, 27). This short duration could be an explanation for the strange absence of this edict in Muslim Arabic sources and the lack of archaeological evidence far from the centre of the Caliph's court.

apologetic and doctrinal literature is indicative of this tendency, as such texts often frame their discourse around an imagined or real interlocutor to be debated or accused (Alexander, 1958, 24-26; Pomer, 2019). The iconoclastic controversy generated a multi-layered structure of "otherness" that responded to both political and ecclesiastical imperatives of unity. First, it was directed against the emerging Caliphate and its universalist religious claims. Second, it targeted the Jewish people, who, despite lacking a state or military power, still claimed the status of God's chosen. Third, and most pressingly, it constructed an internal otherness within Christianity itself: heresy in general, and iconoclasm in particular.

From this perspective, chroniclers, apologists, and heresiological theologians could effectively designate certain groups as "others", projecting blame upon them and shaping a discourse of exclusion and condemnation. This strategy aligns with the well-known practice of *damnatio memoriae*, but in terms of social cohesion and violence, it operates by scapegoating a particular individual —that is the Emperor— and their associated group —that is iconoclasts— as the designated recipients of the community's accumulated violence. In doing so, it also serves as a mechanism to reestablish and reinforce the boundaries between self and other (Brown, 1973, 23-24). Such rhetoric drew heavily from the foundational Christian narrative of martyrdom, persecution, and suffering under pagan emperors, a tradition idealized in early hagiography as an imitation of Christ. However, this literary topos became increasingly anachronistic in the post-Julian era, when Christianity no longer faced existential threats from state power. The iconoclastic period thus provided a renewed context for invoking persecution narratives, reviving early Christian ideals of sanctity and martyrdom within a new internal conflict.

The iconoclastic controversy centered around saint and icon veneration, but fundamentally around the sacred. As previously discussed, the struggle for "orthodoxy" escalated to the highest levels of political authority, culminating in the prohibition of the use of icons and religious images in liturgy, and a widespread disapproval of their private veneration. But what, precisely, links these two religious elements, saints and icons? The answer lies at the very heart of the conflict: holiness. Early Christianity produced a significant corpus of doctrinal literature in which the so-called Church Fathers often prohibited or discouraged the use of religious images, deeming them excessively "pagan" (Alexander, 1958, 53; Florovsky, 1950, 95-96; Nieto

Ibáñez, 2019, 70-71). A number of prominent theologians argued against iconographic practices, even though Christian communities had long utilized images in symbolic forms during the periods of persecution, forms that, to the uninitiated, may have appeared pagan (Alexander, 1958, 1). With the rise of the imperial cult, the veneration of emperors began to overlap with the growing cult of holy individuals (Barnard, 1973; Brown, 1973, 10).

Images of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints gradually came to occupy the role once held by pagan deities, acting as intercessors and wonderworkers (Delahaye, 1962, 121-124), primarily through their relics: physical objects considered to have been sanctified by direct contact with the holy person (Alexander, 1958, 5; Brown, 1973, 8; Narro, 2019, 51-52). For centuries, relics functioned as the medium through which individuals could communicate with the divine. Through them, the faithful sought counsel, healing, or divine favor, thereby affirming the role of free will in human-divine interaction (Brown, 1973, 13). As direct contact with the saints became increasingly rare, visual representations and likenesses emerged to fulfill a similar mediatory function, aspiring to the same miraculous potency (Delahaye, 1962, 31). However, the status of "holiness" itself came under scrutiny, challenged from two opposing directions: on one side stood those who believed that sanctity could only be conferred through ecclesiastical authority; on the other, those who claimed that holiness was bestowed directly by God upon individuals through their deeds and unique access to the divine (Brown, 1973, 21).

This broad field of controversy was fundamentally rooted in two theological assumptions: the concept of free will and the perceived mutability of God's will. Icons were conceived and developed as tangible expressions of an individual's desire to communicate with God on personal matters, often mediated through the saints, seen as humanity's intermediaries.[20] Iconoclastic institutional concept of holiness rejected not only the private use of icons and the veneration of saints, but also, implicitly, the theological foundations of individual agency and spiritual autonomy that underpinned them. According to some scholars, this rejection reveals an aversion to the notion of free will itself, and may explain the characteristically centralized and authoritarian tendencies of iconoclastic regimes during both historical phases. The Christological

[20] "Iconoclasm, therefore, is a centripetal reaction: it asserts the unique value of a few central symbols of the Christian community that enjoyed consecration from above against the centrifugal tendencies that spread the charge of the holy on to a multiplicity of unconsecrated objects" (Brown, 1973, 8-9).

arguments concerning divine will —particularly monotheletism and monophysism— did not emerge prominently until the reign of Constantine V, whose theological writings were notably erudite (Brown, 1973, 2).

However, such theological developments were largely restricted to a narrow circle of educated aristocrats and appear to have functioned more as intellectual justifications for existing ideological stances than as popular convictions. The fact that theological arguments originated primarily within these circles reinforced the perception that piety was something "official", sanctioned exclusively through institutional authority. By contrast, monastic communities, considered the principal setting where saints were more likely to appear and develop their asceticism, constituted the principal source of holiness. Nevertheless, the practical utility of monks and nuns within society was often questioned, rendering them seemingly dispensable and, at times, subject to imperial persecution (Bravo García, 1999, 92; Gero, 1997, 241).

A few introductory remarks are necessary to outline the hagiographical genres, their significance, thematic focus, and the ideals of sanctity they promote. Hagiography constitutes a multifaceted literary category, encompassing miracle collections, martyrdom accounts, encomia, and lives of saints. The *Life of Antony* (BHG 140), traditionally attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296-373), is widely regarded as the first Christian hagiography or, at the very least, one of its foundational texts (Narro, 2019, 26). It stands out for its unique form, originally conceived as a letter addressed to the monks of Alexandria, responding to their interest in the ascetic figure of Antony, who epitomized early Christian monasticism. Embedded in biblical themes and literary traditions drawn from both canonical and apocryphal sources —especially the *Acts of the Apostles* (Diem, 2020: 124)— Antony's narrative echoes key Gospel moments.[21] These features position him within a lineage of saintly exemplars, closely aligned with the models of Christ and the Apostles.

The paradigm of Saint Antony is emblematic in this regard: the ideal of holiness was fundamentally conceived as a reenactment of Christ's life, a recurrent literary motif known as *imitatio Christi*. This pattern, embodied in the ascetic practices of monks

[21] The saint sells his possessions and gives to the poor (chapters 2-3 in Bartelink, 2004); he performs healing miracles (chapter 14.5); he scorns material wealth and emphasizes the soul's supremacy over the body (chapter 7.9); and he exhibits a profound indifference to death and a readiness for martyrdom, particularly during the persecutions of Maximinus Daza (chapters 46.2, 52.3–4).

and hermits (Brown, 1973, 10), shaped the model of monastic sanctity that was often portrayed in hagiographical literature as the highest form of Christian orthodoxy. This stood in stark contrast to the urban lifestyle, especially the opulence and materialism associated with the imperial court, which was fundamentally at odds with ascetic ideals. As a genre, hagiography aims at edification, shaped by religious devotion to the saints and intended to deepen that devotion among readers (Delahaye, 1962, 3). These ideals not only propagated a social model for individual imitation, thus shaping the institution of monasticism, but also reinforced a continuously renewed literary paradigm *ad perpetuum*.

Interestingly, Antony is never explicitly called ἅγιος, that is, saint, in the Greek text, which highlights that his sainthood was a retrospective construction and reinforced by Latin translations that adopted terms such as *sanctus* and *beatus* (Diem, 2020, 124–125). Despite that, the following cases of hagiographies were highly influenced by this first one. As Delahaye observes, saintly figures in Christian literature tend to inherit and absorb the virtues of earlier exemplars, effectively replacing them in the collective memory (1962: 15–16). The *Life of Antony* exemplifies this dynamic. He is portrayed as both a spiritual heir to the Apostles and the founder of an ascetic paradigm, one that elevates the desert over the city, solitude over civic life, and divine law over imperial rule. The desert, once a realm of demonic temptation, becomes under Antony's influence a "city of asceticism",[22] ruled not by emperors but by God himself. Thus, monasticism proposed a countercultural ideal that rejected urban life and asserted the supremacy of God's kingdom over worldly governance.

This tension is evident in Antony's interactions with representatives of the secular world: philosophers and the Emperor, two figures traditionally associated with classical biographical traditions. His confrontation with pagan philosophers[23] dramatizes the superiority of divine wisdom over human reason. Antony dismisses syllogistic argumentation and philosophical pride, astonishing his interlocutors with the clarity and authority of his spiritual insight. Immediately thereafter, he receives a letter from Emperor Constantine. While other monks are amazed, Antony downplays

[22] See chapter 8.1 in Bartelink, 2004.
[23] See chapters 77 to 80 in Bartelink, 2004.

the event: "Why do you marvel that a king writes to us? He is a man. Rather marvel that God wrote the Law for men and has spoken to us through His Son".[24]

This response illustrates Antony's disdain for earthly authority and reinforces his allegiance to a divine kingship. Although he eventually replies to the Emperor —at the monks' urging— he urges Constantine to seek the "eternal king" rather than focus on worldly power. This point will be further explored below as part of the dual symbolic imitation of Christ: that of the king, and that of the saint. Indeed, the literary motif of *imitatio Christi* is central to Christian hagiography. It typically encompasses a performative mode of life that mirrors Christ's own, including martyrdom, the renunciation of worldly attachments, confrontations with demonic forces, the healing of the sick, and the performance of miracles. In this way, the saint is fashioned as an *alter Christus*, a visible embodiment of divine likeness conveyed through the literary narrative.

In sum, the *Life of Antony* established a paradigm of Christian sanctity: ascetic, allegedly apolitical, yet profoundly impactful. Through Athanasius's portrayal, Antony becomes the prototype of the Christian saint not through martyrdom in the traditional sense, but through his radical withdrawal from the material world. This model would shape hagiographic writing for centuries to come, and still has some effects in later texts like the *Life of Stephen the Younger*. Ideals of sanctity were constructed upon this early *exemplum* and were further developed through a wide-ranging literary tradition that evolved over centuries and across a multitude of texts. Saints were granted special liturgical attention, which included the veneration of icons, relics, and the dedication of churches, among other material expressions. These holy objects were not only linked to the image and memory of the saint —as hagiographical texts were— but were also believed to possess thaumaturgic power, enabling a significant spiritual connection with the divine. In this context, it is important to note that such objects became a primary target of iconoclastic critique.

b. The purpose of this study

"We should look more closely, therefore, at another area of the religious life of the Late Antique world in order to find the remainder of that charge of feeling that had come,

[24] See chapter 81 in Bartelink, 2004.

by the eighth century, to make an icon appear holy. I would suggest that we look more closely at the holy man. From the fourth century onwards, the holy man was a living icon.[25] To the theologian he was man at its height, man as first made 'in the image of God'" (Brown, 1973, 12). This claim is both timely and essential, and it now demands a response. The so-called "Dark Ages" have been examined through diverse perspectives and methodologies, yet rarely through a foundational inquiry into the role of religion in society. Often, Christianity receives a biased treatment shaped by the scholars' Western cultural backgrounds. In some cases, the approach is overtly apologetic and perhaps too emic, or from an insider's perspective. In others, it is categorically critical, though still emic in nature. The methodology and analysis proposed here aim to introduce a new perspective, grounded in a set of fundamental questions: what is religion as a human phenomenon? How does it relate to culture and society? And what role does hagiography play in shaping and reflecting this relationship?

This thesis has been developed within the framework of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master in Religious Diversity in a Globalised World (ReD Global). Rooted in the interdisciplinary formation offered by this program, the primary objective of the present work is to integrate my academic background in Greek philology with new insights from religious studies. In pursuit of innovative research at the intersection of Greek literature and the study of religion, the *Life of Stephen the Younger* has been selected as an interesting source and analytical vehicle for this endeavor. Although numerous scholars have explored the religious and historical dimensions of the medieval period —particularly within the context of Byzantium— few, if any, have approached these subjects using methodologies informed by recent developments in religious studies, anthropology, or the social sciences. Most existing scholarship remains grounded in traditional historical and philological methods, which, as any other discipline or method, has lights and shades.

In this regard, the application of contemporary theoretical frameworks may offer new interpretative possibilities. One such framework is the mimetic theory developed by the French sociologist René Girard, which provides a compelling model for understanding religion as a mechanism for mitigating violence within societies. This thesis aims to demonstrate the applicability of Girard's mimetic theory to a new textual

[25] Several scholars support this view (Ševčenko, 1977, 120), asserting that saints function as living icons, a foundational claim for the central thesis of this paper, as will be discussed below.

corpus, offering a new lens through which to examine hagiography. Specifically, it will argue that this *Life* in particular presents a form of ritualized violence directed against a sacrificial victim, the martyr, who is constructed as a Christ-like figure —an imitation of the original propitiatory victim of Christianity. By analyzing the narrative through this theoretical approach, the martyrdom is revealed not simply as a historical account, but as a symbolic act of unanimous collective violence imbued with religious significance.

Furthermore, this analysis opens the way to interpret both iconoclasm and monachomachy as manifestations of a broader sacrificial crisis. The use of violence against monks and icons has long posed a challenge for medievalists, often remaining obscure or interpreted solely through political or theological frameworks. However, when examined through the lens of Girardian theory, these acts of aggression become significantly more intelligible. Both the attacks on monks and the destruction of icons can be seen as responses to the same sacrificial crisis —namely, the rejection of the traditional monastic ideal of sanctity as embodied in the iconodule position. From this perspective, iconoclasm emerges not merely as a theological dispute, but as a manifestation of a broader sacrificial mechanism aimed at neutralizing a perceived threat to social cohesion. Just as Girard demonstrated the applicability of his theory to ancient Greek mythology and tragedy, this study seeks to explore its relevance within the context of Byzantine hagiography and the broader religious and sociopolitical tensions of the period.

c. The violence of religion and René Girard

As previously mentioned, this study approaches the hagiographical account of the *Life of Stephen the Younger* through a methodological lens informed by René Girard's theory of religion and violence, particularly as articulated in *Violence and the Sacred*.[26] To ensure a clear and effective application of this framework, it is essential to clarify the key concepts and terminology introduced earlier. This chapter, therefore, aims to establish the terminological and theoretical foundations necessary for the analysis that follows, treating hagiography not only as a genre of Christian literature but also as a cultural artifact that embodies the underlying tensions that led to phenomena such as

[26] References to *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Girard,), along with more recent works by different authors, will be included as required by the topic

iconoclasm and monachomachy. All of the concepts presented here will be described in accordance with René Girard's original formulations, allowing minimal modifications to his theoretical framework. Girard's central claim —that his theory identifies a universal anthropological structure underlying diverse cultures and societies— requires not only synchronical validation but also diachronical substantiation. Examining Christianity through this lens will undoubtedly contribute to a more nuanced and enriched paradigm within the field of Byzantine studies.

The first concept that must be introduced is *religion*, which, in this context, has to be closely examined in relation to the notion of *sacrifice* and that of *mimesis*. Girard analyses the works of several ethnographers and sociologists in order to provide a comparative study of the phenomenon of sacrifice as a universal element in human societies. The function of ritual sacrifice, involving the symbolic or physical immolation of a victim, has traditionally been understood as an offering intended to establish or maintain a connection with a divinity. However, scholars such as Hubert and Mauss have challenged this perspective by inverting the causal order: they argue that sacrifice does not arise from the divine, but rather that divinity itself originates from sacrificial practice (Girard, 2023, 132–133). The first propitiatory victim is sacrificed after being collectively blamed by the community. This primordial figure reflects the ambivalence embodied in the myth of Oedipus or the Greek concept of the φαρμακός:[27] while still part of society, the victim is regarded as the source of pestilence and misfortune, yet upon expulsion or death, is transformed into a savior and even divinized as a source of peace and order (Girard, 2023, 140–141).

Following the initial sacrificial act, society seeks to reenact it through the ritualized imitation of this original violence. It is in this context that *mimesis* emerges as a central characteristic of religious experience: the ritual serves to reaffirm the peace and order established by the foundational sacrifice. Thus, it requires suitable

[27] The Greek concept of φαρμακός refers to an individual chosen as a sacrificial victim or executed as a form of atonement or purification on behalf of the community —in essence, a human scapegoat. René Girard adopts this term not only in its original sacrificial context but also in its etymological ambiguity, as it can mean both "poison" and "remedy". This duality underscores the paradoxical nature of the scapegoat, who is simultaneously perceived as both dispensable and essential. Through the ritual of sacrifice, such a figure undergoes a symbolic metamorphosis: initially blamed and cast out as the source of communal disorder, the victim is ultimately reimagined as a source of restoration and harmony. Using Girard's own words through my modest translation into English: "the hero attracts towards himself a violence that affects the entire community, a malevolent and contagious violence that his death or triumph transforms into order and security" (Girard, 2023, 130).

scapegoats, that is, sacrificeable victims, upon whom the collective violence of the community can be projected with no harm, thereby reenacting the original sacrificial scenario. These scapegoats may take the form of criminals, outsiders, animals, plants, or even inanimate objects such as statues.

Yet some fundamental questions remain: why does the first sacrifice occur? And, consequently, what is religion? According to René Girard, the origin of the sacrificial mechanism, and thus of religion itself, lies in what he terms the "sacrificial crisis". This crisis emerges when a society becomes engulfed in an uncontrollable escalation of arbitrary and indiscriminate violence. In response to this threat, the scapegoat mechanism functions as a cathartic resolution: collective violence is redirected onto a single victim, thereby restoring order. This process not only mitigates the internal chaos but also provides a foundational narrative that legitimizes the structure of society. Over time, the ritualization of this mechanism constitutes what we understand as religion, a system that perpetuates social harmony by symbolically reenacting the original act of sacrificial violence. "The presence of religion at the origin of all human societies is undeniable and fundamental. Of all social institutions, religion is the only one to which science has never been able to attribute a real purpose, an authentic function. We affirm, therefore, that religion has as its object the mechanism of the scapegoat; its function is to perpetuate or renew the effects of this mechanism, that is, to keep violence out of the community"[28] (Girard, 2023, 137).

Although religion functions as the primary mechanism by which a human community averts arbitrary and indiscriminate violence, it simultaneously permits and even legitimizes certain forms of performative violence. This paradox arises from the assumption that some types of violence are deemed acceptable or even necessary when directed toward the preservation of social order. A proper sacrifice produces a victim whose elimination does not disrupt the community, but rather restores its equilibrium. However, when the foundational fiction that sustains this sacrificial mechanism is questioned, namely the belief that the victim is unanimously recognized as a legitimate target and that the violence enacted is "good", the community enters what Girard terms a *sacrificial crisis*. In such moments, the distinction between permissible and impermissible violence collapses, threatening the very structure of social cohesion:

[28] The translation into English is my own and so will be all subsequent references to Girard (2023).

“The *sacrificial crisis*, that is, the loss of sacrifice, is the loss of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference is lost, purification is no longer possible, and impure, contagious, or reciprocal, violence spreads throughout the community” (Girard, 2023, 77).

The sacrificial crisis emerges when the distinctions that uphold social order begin to dissolve. This disappearance of differences gives rise to undifferentiated and reciprocal violence: “The *sacrificial crisis* must be defined as a *crisis of differences*, that is, of the cultural order as a whole. Indeed, this cultural order is nothing other than an organized system of differences; these differential distances give individuals their "identity" and allow them to situate themselves in relation to one another” (Girard, 2023, 77). Endless symmetry equals endless violence (Girard, 2023, 80-81), and this is precisely where the sacrificial rite intervenes: to preserve order through the rite. Every rite involves a form of regulated violence, which serves to restore and reaffirm social distinctions after their threatened dissolution. The ritual does not eliminate violence, but rather contains and redirects it, reestablishing the differences essential for communal stability (Girard, 2023, 167-168).

The concept of *mimetic doubles* emerges precisely from the dissolution of differences characteristic of a sacrificial crisis. When two individuals imitate each other’s desires (Girard, 2023, 209), they enter a state of antagonistic mimesis over an object that cannot be possessed by both. In this escalation, the object itself gradually loses significance, as the rival becomes the sole focus of attention (Wandinger, 2013, 129). This is just one example of the conditions that can unleash the most acute threat of communal violence. Other phenomena or actions that expose a society to this peril include forms of violence that cannot be integrated into its cultural framework, such as parricide, fratricide, or infanticide (Girard, 2023, 120). Extending this logic, the appearance of natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, and most notably, plagues, also signals the collapse of social order, as these catastrophes strike indiscriminately, erasing the differences that preserve the social order (Girard, 2023, 115). A third major trigger of sacrificial crisis is incest. Sexuality in its rawest form, deeply intertwined with violence, becomes taboo in nearly all societies. Myths and rituals often feature incest or parricide as peripheral narrative elements yet, as Girard suggests, they function as symbolic representations of individual violence that serve as a final bulwark against the total disintegration caused by uncontained mimetic conflict

(Girard, 2023, 172-173). Natural phenomena also play a significant role in this regard, though their symbolic function tends to be more generalized, often framed as prophetic or apocalyptic signs within the cultural narrative.

Although this may appear confusing, Girard intruduces many examples from many different societies through ethnographical accounts, and also from Greek mythology, tragedy and the Bible. In fact, he considers mythology to be one of the most intense reconstructions of the previous sacrificial crises. Mythology frequently alludes to the sacrificial crisis, yet it does so only to obscure it. Myths serve as retrospective transfigurations of such crises, reinterpreting them through the lens of the cultural order established in their aftermath. (Girard, 2023, 99). Uncovering the sacrificial logic in mythology is considerably more difficult than in tragedy. Whereas myths tend to veil violence behind the figure of the monstrous or the marvelous, tragedy focuses on anecdotal details that transform the extraordinary violence of the sacrificial crisis into a cathartic experience for the audience, ultimately restoring difference through tragic antagonism. This tragic intuition, often unconscious on the part of the poet, closely resembles the prophetic insight found in the Old Testament. (Girard, 2023, 101). Thus, all these types of narratives refer back to a foundational event as a moment of creation—an origin point for both myth and ritual. Once the ritual is established and the original crisis is absorbed into cultural memory, it functions as a performative safeguard against future outbreaks of violence. This is achieved by reenacting the foundational event in a controlled, often anecdotal form, reducing the original collective violence to an instance of isolated, individual transgression.

Under this prism, I understand Christian hagiography as a form of tragic intuition, that is one that channels the dynamics of sacrificial crisis through cathartic sanctity and reducing collective violence to the individual passion of martyrdom. The genre evolved significantly over the centuries, to the point that many hagiographies also display prophetic or mythological traits. According to Delahaye, the purpose of hagiography is at edification and increasing the saint's devotion (1962, 3). Van Uytfanghe, on the other hand, proposes a particular characterization of hagiography based on four key elements (1994, 170–177): first (1), the distance between the saint and God presents the former as both a θεῖος ἀνήρ, a divine man, and a θεράπων κυρίου, a servant of the Lord, with this hierarchical relationship only fully manifesting after the saint's death through *miracula post mortem*; second (2), hagiography is typically

embedded within a tradition that references sacred Christian texts, drawing on the imitation of Christ, typological naming conventions, and biblical *exempla*, since biblical revelation forms the foundation of hagiographical understanding; third (3), the hagiographical discourse addresses the entire community of Christian believers, inviting them to participate in sanctity, and shaping communal liturgy through cult and commemoration; four (4), the ethical framework, that is the ἦθος, presented in Lives is rooted in *imitatio Christi* —which does not necessarily imply martyrdom, but rather includes humility, charity, forgiveness, and other virtues— and often entails a lifelong struggle against God's antagonist, Satan, through ascetic practices, exorcisms, and miracles.

In light of the preceding observations drawn from the philological tradition, this exposition must now engage with René Girard's perhaps polemical interpretation of Christianity. Central to Girard's theory is the notion that myth functions as a reenactment mechanism, designed to recall and obscure the foundational act of violence that emerges during a sacrificial crisis. As previously suggested, this mechanism is also detectable throughout the Old Testament. A paradigmatic example is the story of Cain and Abel, presented as mimetic doubles thus serving as a symbolic narrative of an archetypal crisis of the differences that unleashes undiscriminate violence and fratricide. This biblical tale operates as a foundational text that establishes "a differential system, which serves, as always, to discourage mimetic rivalry and generalized conflict" (Girard, 1987, 146).

A key point of contrast emerges when comparing the biblical account of Cain and Abel with mythological narratives such as that of Romulus and Remus. In the latter, the fratricide committed by Romulus is legitimized within the narrative framework: Remus is portrayed as a transgressor, and Romulus's act is framed as necessary for the founding of Rome, thus reinforcing the scapegoat mechanism by portraying the victim as guilty. In stark contrast, the account of Cain and Abel subverts this structure. Here, the victim, Abel, is clearly innocent, and his murder is unequivocally condemned, both morally and theologically, by the divine voice (Girard, 1987, 147). Rather than legitimizing the violence, the biblical narrative sides with the victim, marking a radical departure from traditional mythological patterns and offering what Girard considers the unique revelatory quality of Judeo-Christian texts (Wandinger, 2013, 132-133).

The tendency of the Old Testament is a increasing subversion of the three pillars of primitive religion,[29] which according to Girard are: (1) mythology, (2) sacrificial cult, and (3) "the primitive conception of the law as a form of obsessive differentiation, a refusal of mixed states that looks upon indifferentiation with horror" (Girard, 1987, 154). The final result of this subversion is the New Testament and its Passion, which clearly stands against the sacrifice of the scapegoat, that is Christ, revealing the innocence of the victim regarding the violence that their sacrifice would prevent. Jesus' sacrifice[30] is deeply "connected to every ritual on the entire planet" (Girard, 1987, 167). The reason lies in its revelation of the true innocence of the sacrificial victim by reproducing a fully sacrificial scenario; as a consequence, such accounts are discredited and rendered ineffective from that point onward: "by revealing the founding system, they stop it from functioning" (Girard, 1987, 174).

At this point, it becomes evident that the sacrificial system operates through various mechanisms, yet ultimately reveals the foundational structure of culture and society as rooted in the rejection of indiscriminate violence[31] and the affirmation of difference as the basis of identity. Girard, for his part, identifies two fundamental forms of mimetic sacrifice (Wandinger, 2013, 139): the sacrifice of the *other*, exemplified in traditional scapegoating mechanisms where collective violence is discharged onto a surrogate victim, and *self*-sacrifice, which emerges as a transformative response to the former, disrupting the cycle of mimetic violence by absorbing it. This distinction is crucial not to propose an "essential" superiority of Christianity, but to illuminate the dialectic within religious traditions, where sacrificial logic persists and evolves rather

[29] This naming is evidently shaped by a strong Western bias, as even Girard himself acknowledged, recognizing that the terminology and interpretive frameworks often reflect the cultural assumptions and epistemological priorities of the Western scholarly tradition: "We can no longer believe that if it is we who are reading the Gospels in the light of an ethnological, modern revelation, which would really be the first thing of its kind. We have to reverse this order. It is still the great Judaeo-Christian spirit that is doing the reading. All that appears in ethnology, appears in the light of a continuing revelation, an immense process of historical work that enables us little by little to catch up with texts that are, in effect, already quite explicit, though not for the kind of people that we are —*who have eyes and see not, ears and hear not*" (italics in the original) (Girard, 1987, 177).

[30] Girard's biased view of Christianity is often too evident and sometimes even violent. His essencialist defence of this religion and its revelatory aspects is so striking that he himself corrected at some point in his late life. One of the main examples is his former refusal to apply the word "sacrifice" to any Christian event, namely Christ's Passion. Nevertheless, he revoked this refusal with the following words —quoted in Wandinger, 2013, 138—: "There is neither non-sacrificial space, nor 'true history'. (...) The criticism of an 'historical Christianity' and an argument in favor of a kind of 'essential Christianity', [...], was absurd".

[31] Thus perpetuating the concepf of the sacred as "everything that dominates humankind with greater ease the more humankind believes itself capable of dominating it. (...) Violence constitutes the authentic heart and the secret soul of the sacred" (my translation) (Girard, 2023, 52).

than vanishes. Christianity not only identifies and deifies the force of violence in the figure of Satan, but also externalizes and scapegoats it. The Christian narrative centers itself on the experience of persecution and the imperative to avoid sin, understood primarily as those acts that provoke indiscriminate violence and sacrificial crises: incest, parricide, homicide, and similar transgressions. These behaviors are not merely moral failures; they are, again, catalysts of communal disintegration and symbolic threats to the differentiation that sustains social order. The very concept of the sin and the recognition of God's "negative" mimetic double, that is Satan, as a permanent threat due to the sinful origin of humankind, works as a symbolic recongnision of human predisposition to violence (Girard, 1987, 162-163).

One of the most distinctive developments of sacrificial logic in Christianity is the figure of the *witness*, or μάρτυς. This individual enacts a unique form of *mimesis* through their death, symbolically reproducing Christ's Passion. Such figures often undergo a posthumous deification process, becoming the center of cultic practices and rituals that venerate their sanctity. As noted above, and following Hippolyte Delehaye's classic formulation, the fundamental purpose of hagiography is edification, the moral and spiritual edification of the reader, and the intensification of devotion to a particular saint (Delehaye, 1962, 3). Martyrdom thus represents the supreme form of *imitatio Christi*, and its narrative function, according to René Girard, is to magnify the revelatory power of founding violence (Girard, 1987, 173). These accounts must be understood as narratives that serve symbolic anthropological purposes.[32] Thus, hagiographical accounts that portray martyrdom or any form of *imitatio Christi* do not merely present moral exempla for emulation, they also sustain and propagate the legitimacy of the second sacrificial model: self-sacrifice. Through this framework, the tragic intuition embedded in hagiography maintains the narrative's anchorage in reality, serving as a cathartic mechanism by preserving the mythical monstrous figure of the persecutor as a symbolic embodiment of Satan.[33] Persecutors act as agents of the scapegoat logic,

[32] See Girard's commentary on Frazer (Girard, 1987, 169): "Frazer persists in making the Gospel no different from a historical account".

[33] The monstrous characterization of the "other", the accuser or persecutor, is a recurring feature of the primitive sacrificial structure. In such frameworks, the victim is frequently dehumanized, animalized, or even replaced symbolically by an animal (Girard, 2023, 143). This symbolic transformation reinforces the victim's status as both external to and responsible for the community's crisis, thus legitimizing their elimination. In Greek mythology, for instance, the dynamic between hero and monster replicates this sacrificial paradigm, wherein the monster represents the threat that must be destroyed to restore order (Girard, 2023, 129–130). Similarly, ritual practices among certain African communities reflect comparable structures, wherein the king must endure the symbolic of communal violence or the perpetration of all

targeting saints who ultimately undergo martyrdom. Yet, the narrative consistently safeguards the sanctity of the martyr, thereby legitimizing their self-sacrifice and simultaneously exposing the inefficacy of the scapegoat mechanism. No individual deserves to be sacrificed, for sin is a universal human condition; hence, no one is uniquely expendable.

A scapegoat remains effective for as long as we believe in its guilt. Nevertheless, the ethical system rooted in Christian sanctity renders martyrdom desirable, presenting it as a pathway to becoming godlike (Wandinger, 2013, 139). Importantly, the second form of sacrifice (self-sacrifice) retains many structural affinities with the first, or *primitive sacrifice*. The opposition of mimetic doubles persists, now reframed as the internal tension between sin and temptation. If the divine antagonist, Satan, prevails, it results in the collapse of social differentiation and the onset of a sacrificial crisis. Martyrdom, by reenacting this mechanism, exposes the origin of violence: the persecutor, not the victim. The sacrifice here presents a dramatic trap through a saturnalic inversion (Girard, 1987, 167-169): those killed are not the scapegoats that receive collective violence, and the actual violence is not the sacrifice of Christ or the martyrs. Those who are violented and condemned are the persecutors, and the ones divinized and adored as the defenders of social order are the martyrs instead.

Therefore, from a Girardian perspective, hagiography can be understood as a genre endowed with a distinct tragic intuition, wherein "the stereotype unveils the essential" (Girard, 2023, 74). The recurring hagiographical motifs serve as connective threads linking the genre to both the Gospels and to deeper testimonies of sacrificial crisis. At the same time, these motifs function as cathartic mechanisms, aiming to defuse the potential for renewed sacrificial crises, an idea I will elaborate upon in the following sections.

2. Overview of the *Life of Stephen the younger*

The text opens with an address to the alleged commissioner, Epiphanios, followed by an extended prologue that engages with standard hagiographical themes, such as the *magnitudo rerum* and comparisons to biblical patriarchs and apostles. The author then

the crimes that menace society, in order to be the protector of the community after being sacrificed through a symbolic substitute (Girard, 2023, 155–163). In the case of martyrs and persecutors, the role is subverted symbolically, but the figures are still constructed over the same basic features.

situates the martyrdom of Stephen forty-two years earlier—an important chronological detail, as previously discussed. Throughout the text, comparisons to the protomartyr Stephen are frequent, with the phrase ὀνόματι καὶ πράγματι ὁμώνυμος καὶ ὁμότροπος[34] underscoring this parallel (Auzépy, 2016, 91). The narrative then shifts to Stephen's family context: his father, renowned by the year 714 for his piety and honor, and his mother, portrayed as sharing his virtuous disposition,[35] gave birth to two daughters, both of whom were raised and educated in pious literature.

Nevertheless, the mother, named Anna, fears becoming sterile without having borne a son. The theme of στείρωσις (sterility), together with the ideal of virginity, is a common topos in hagiographical literature, often invoked to echo the motif of Christ's conception without sexual intercourse, or *imitatio Mariae* (Narro, 2019, 75-80). In this narrative, the *imitatio Christi* embodied by the future saint and martyr is also projected onto the mother: Anna emulates Mary. She becomes the central figure in this portion of the account, yet the symbolic elements surrounding her should be interpreted as representative of the ever-present threat of sacrificial crisis. In particular, the impurity associated with menstrual blood is, according to Girard (2023, 55–59), perceived as a social threat, a potential source of disorder.[36] In this context, Anna is presented as nearly sterile, fearful of the approaching menopause: τὰ γυναικῶν πρὸς στείρωσιν αὐτῆς ἐγγίζοντα[37] (Auzépy, 2016, 92). The model of Mary is clearly associated here with the rejection of sexual intercourse, perceived as a potential source of disorder and, consequently, violence. This symbolism aligns with Girardian theory, as it is grounded in a mimetic mechanism of *imitatio*.

Nevertheless, the full passage shows more intricate relation to this mimetic understanding: Anna addresses an icon of the Θεοτόκος, the mother of God, and prays for a male child. In her prayer, she refers to Eve and to Saint Anna, the mother of Mary. As the editor notes in a footnote, this conceptualization draws on the *Oratio in SS. Deiparae Presentationem* by patriarch Tarasios.[38] The mention of Eve as the source of condemnation for all women stands in direct contrast to Mary's intercessory role as a

[34] My translation: "his equal both in name and deeds".
[35] ὁμοιοτρόπου (Auzépy, 2016, 91).
[36] "Sexuality provokes countless quarrels, jealousy, resentment, and battles; it is a constant source of disorder, even within the most harmonious communities" (Girard, 2023, 58).
[37] "The approaching signs common to women towards her sterility".
[38] See footnote 16 (Auzépy, 2016, 183).

redemptive paradigm.[39] This dualistic opposition echoes the Girardian concept of mimetic doubles, in which identity is shaped through the imitation of Mary, while alterity is defined through the rejection of Eve's (and by extension, Satan's) negative influence (Narro, 2019, 78). In doing so, the text not only evokes the scapegoating of Eve as a remnant of a previous sacrificial crisis, but also presents the imitation of Mary as the symbolic resolution. Such mimetic dynamics exemplify sacrificial reverberations across traditions, confirming Girard's observation: "the first crises are interpreted in light of the following" (2023, 101).

In addition to this, the intercession of the icon yields two major consequences for the symbolic interpretation of the narrative. On a primary level, it functions as concrete evidence of the power of icons as wonderworking objects, a claim explicitly denied by the iconoclasts. The act of praying before the icon culminates in an incubatory vision, wherein the Virgin Mary announces the onset of pregnancy. Thus, Stephen's conception is not only devoid of the potential violence or ambiguity associated with sexual intercourse, being made possible through the intercession of an icon, or more precisely, of a divine feminine figure manifested through the icon, but also firmly rooted in two key symbolic identities. Stephen becomes, in essence, the child of both the feminine and the icon.

This leads to a deeper, secondary level of interpretation: the conspicuous absence of masculine actants in Stephen's conception. If the phenomenon of *incubatio* through an icon affirms the legitimacy and effectiveness of devotional practices centered on icons, then the fact that a male child is generated solely through feminine agency—both human and divine—subverts traditional gender expectations. Stephen's origin story can be read as a symbolic inversion of what Vinson terms "muscular Christianity," a post-iconoclastic ideal that sought to reassert the masculinity of male saints (Vinson, 1998, 503–504). In contrast, Stephen embodies a sanctity derived from female intercession and divine grace rather than male lineage or patriarchal authority. This interpretation aligns with the significant roles women and eunuchs played in the restoration of orthodoxy following both iconoclastic periods. Their prominence, often

[39] ἡ παντὸς τοῦ θήλεως τὸ ὀνειδιστικὸν τῆς προμήτορος Εὔας κατάκριμα εἰς παρρησίαν εὐφρόσυνον μεταβαλοῦσα τῷ θεανθρώπῳ σου τόκῳ (Auzépy, 2016, 92), "you [Maria] who through your divine-human birth transformed into joyful boldness the reproachful condemnation of our first mother Eve for all womankind".

viewed with suspicion by later authors, was a defining feature of the power dynamics surrounding the schism between Patriarchs Ignatios and Photios (Vinson, 1998, 486–488), a conflict that encapsulated the gendered and political tensions of the era.

As previously noted, icons and saints were understood as expressions of human liturgical freedom (Brown, 1973, 73); prayer through icons addresses the spiritual needs of the faithful in much the same way as similar practices did in the traditional religiosity of Greco-Roman world (Delahaye, 1962, 122; Narro, 2019, 53–54). Furthermore, the Virgin occupies the apex of this devotional access to the divine. As Brown emphasizes, "The Virgin is of crucial importance. For she represented the acme of a mortal's intercession in heaven" (Brown, 1973, 14).

The subsequent sections of the *Life* recount the appointment of Germanos on the very day of his enthronement as patriarch. It is he who first invokes the protomartyr Stephen, thereby bestowing the name upon the child even while he is still in the womb. After the birth, Stephen receives his name in accordance with the prediction of Germanos. In this passage, the newborn is compared to Samuel, and his mother to her namesake Anna of the Old Testament. The typological scheme of Anna–Samuel and Anna–Mary, both referring to the miraculous birth of singular human figures, is mirrored here through the name of Stephen's mother. However, this pattern ultimately serves to lead the narrative toward its true mimetic center: the pair Mary–Jesus. As an act of gratitude for the intercession of the icon of Mary, both Anna and her husband make a pilgrimage to the holy church of Blachernae to pray before the icon. This devotional act corresponds to the practice of *incubatio*, a ritual of seeking divine communication or healing through sleep in a sacred space, and, as the editor notes, it has a direct parallel in the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*.[40]

The subsequent section narrates the baptism of Stephen, performed by Patriarch Germanos, who once again draws a comparison between the child and the protomartyr Stephen, thereby reinforcing the mimetic continuity and sanctified destiny attributed to the newborn: Θεὸς ὁμοιότροπον ἀναδείξειεν τὸν παῖδα τοῦτον οὗπερ εἰλήφει καὶ τὸ ὄνομα[41] (Auzépy, 2016, 96). Stephen is presented as θεοφόρος, one who bears or is inspired by God. This designation stems not only from his miraculous conception but

[40] See footnote 40 (Auzépy, 2016, 187).
[41] My translation: "May God prove that this child has the same constitution as the one after whom he has received also the name".

also from the exceptional nature of his early nourishment. His mother, Anna, is said to have given him μυστικὸν γάλα[42] and οἵαν στερεὰν τροφὴν τῶν θείων ἐννοιῶν τὴν γνῶσιν[43] (Auzépy, 2016, 96). The narrative highlights Anna's role as his primary instructor in divine studies (ταῖς θείαις μελέταις), underscoring the rejection of worldly concerns.

This rejection is particularly significant when considered alongside Stephen's subsequent participation in vigils and rituals commemorating the saints, as well as his excellence in sacred scholarship (Auzépy, 2016, 97). His education reflects the values and discipline of monastic life, emphasizing virtues such as devotion, asceticism, and liturgical engagement. These traits not only align him with the monastic ideal but also foreshadow the narrative's development, where a strong association is established between icons and monasticism. It becomes completely clear when the narrator says: ἐπεπόθει ζηλωτὴς γενέσθαι τῶν θείων ἐκείνων ἀνδρῶν τῶν παρ' αὐταῖς ἐμφερομένων[44] (Auzépy, 2016, 98).

Following the account of Stephen's education, the narrative shifts its focus to the reigning Emperor, Leo III. His portrayal is decidedly negative: a usurper who seized power from Theodosius, Leo is likened to notorious figures from Scripture. This characterization serves to frame him as an embodiment of impiety and opposition to the sacred tradition, reinforcing the broader mimetic structure in which persecutors of the holy are aligned with archetypal enemies of the faith, such as Doek[45] or Bathasar.[46] He remained on the throne for ten years before revealing his heretical adherence to iconoclasm,[47] a position here associated with Manichaeism and contrasted with the Aphthartodocetae[48] (Auzépy, 2016, 98). The Emperor's discourse is limited to a single brief statement in which he equates the reproduction of icons with the idol-making explicitly prohibited by Scripture.[49]

[42] My translation: "Mystical milk".
[43] My translation: "Such solid nourishment as the knowledge of the divine concepts".
[44] My translation: "He longed to become an imitator of those divine men that he found within them [the Holy Scriptures]".
[45] 1 Kgs 22, 18.
[46] Dan 5, 3-4.
[47] The editor notes in this passage that the chronology is "tendancieuse" (see n. 53, Auzépy, 2016, 190).
[48] See footnote 56 (Auzépy, 2016, 190).
[49] Εἰδωλικῆς τεχνουργίας ὑπαρχούσης τῆς τῶν εἰκόνων ἀνατυπώσεως, οὐ δεῖ ταύτας προσκυνεῖν (Auzépy, 2016, 98-99). My translation: "Since the reproduction of images originates from idolatrous craftsmanship, they should not be venerated".

In response, Germanos delivers a significantly longer and more developed discourse, thereby reinforcing the common portrayal of the iconoclastic faction as intellectually deficient and depicting the iconoclastic period as culturally and spiritually impoverished (de Boor, 1883, 405; Lemerle, 1971, 106-107). Germanos' intervention marks the Life's first detailed presentation of the core arguments in defense of icons. He begins by distinguishing between the idols of impious pagans and the holy icons venerated by the Christian faithful. These icons are defended not only by their historical use as didactic tools to illustrate parables and miracles, but also by their consistent affirmation in Christian worship through the rulings of the six preceding ecumenical councils.

The final sentence the discourse is particularly significant, as it introduces the Christological framework that underpins the iconophile position: ὁ γὰρ τὴν εἰκόνα ἀτιμάζων εἰς τὸν ἐν αὐτῇ ἐγχαραττόμενον ἀναπέμπει τὴν ὕβριν[50] (Auzépy, 2016, 100). The introduction of the concept of ὕβρις at this point is particularly significant, as it highlights the Christian paradigm of servitude and subordination imprinted on the believer's consciousness, an antithetical model of the triumphant yet suffering Messiah (Girard, 1987, 156). This paradigm offers a dual figure for emulation: the liberating prince and the suffering servant of God. Germanos' closing remarks reflect this framework by first condemning a hubristic act —dishonoring the icons— as a rebellion against the true Lord, and then by affirming piety through the veneration of the sacred icons.

The narrative proceeds through two major historical events that continue to involve both the patriarch and the Emperor: first, the deposition of Germanos, and second, the destruction of the icon at the Chalké Gate. His successor, Anastasios, is portrayed as impious and submissive to imperial authority, effectively surrendering ecclesiastical autonomy to the crown. The removal of the icon of Christ is accompanied by a striking episode foreshadowing the eruption of violence: a group of women, seized by divine zeal, attacked and killed the magistrate responsible for the act. These women were later executed by the authorities, yet the hagiographic account portrays them as "holy athletes of God", thus transforming their insurrection into an expression of sanctified martyrdom.[51] This dual act of violence functions as a narrative

[50] My translation: "For the one who dishonors the icon directs the insolence to the one depicted in it".
[51] See Appendix: Text 3 (pp. 65-66).

foreshadowing in two key ways: first, by emphasizing the prominent and active role of women in the unfolding conflict; and second, by serving as a warning to the community of the imminent eruption of violence, both divine and state-sanctioned. In doing so, the narrative aligns the divine will with the iconodule faction, portraying their cause as just and divinely favored. This framing implicitly suggests that the sacrificial crisis has been resolved, and that God has sanctioned the use of "good" violence against the iconoclasts, in accordance with Girard's framework of sacrificial logic.

Conversely, the violence enacted against these women is not legitimized within the narrative framework. Their execution follows the primitive model of scapegoating, as they are portrayed as acting under divine inspiration rather than personal guilt. In this sense, their sacrifice serves not to restore order, but rather to expose the inefficacy and moral failure of the scapegoating mechanism. As Girard notes, such cycles of vengeance perpetuate violence rather than resolving it, revealing a system disconnected from true religious or sacrificial logic. Instead of protecting society from violence, this response reinforces it, underscoring the flaws of sacrificial substitution when it is unveiled and the scapegoat is no longer deemed guilty unanimously (Girard, 2023, 29-31). The beginning of the next section proves the great danger to which community is exposed: Ταύτην οὖν ἐπὶ πολὺ ἔχουσα τὴν σκοτόμαιναν, κατ' ἐκεῖνο καιροῦ ἡ Κωνσταντινούπολις διέμενεν ἐρεθίζουσα[52] (Auzépy, 2016, 101). At stake are darkness and disorder, the hallmarks of a sacrificial crisis that has failed to be resolved.

The family's decision to emigrate to Mount Auxentios amid the social and spiritual unrest of Constantinople reflects a retreat from sacrificial disorder toward a space of sacral continuity. The saintly cave there located, previously inhabited by Auxentios and his successors,[53] becomes a locus of mimetic sanctity, where holiness is transmitted through solitude and ascetic repetition. Each resident embodies the iconodule ideal in contrast to the worldly chaos, thereby reinforcing the cave as a symbolic refuge against the sacrificial crisis engulfing the city. In fact, Mount Auxentios is depicted in the text with deliberate parallels to other biblically significant mountains, such as Horeb, Sinai, and Carmel. This comparison elevates its symbolic and mimetic

[52] My translation: "Thus, long possessed by this moonless night, Constantinople at that time remained in a state of agitation".
[53] First, his disciple Sergios, then saint Bendemianos, then Gregory, and lastly John, according to the *Life* (Auzépy, 2016, 102).

status, portraying it not merely as a place of retreat, but as a site of divine encounter and revelation. The portrayal of Mount Auxentios as a refuge from iconoclasm thereby reinforces Auzépy's hypothesis concerning the deliberate effort to present the monastery of the Trikhinareai as ideologically purified.

Then, John, the monk reputed to possess the gift of clairvoyance, addresses the young Stephen with prophetic insight. At the age of fifteen, Stephen embraces monastic life, thus fulfilling the vocation that, according to the narrative, had been ordained even prior to his birth.[54] He had chosen "to dwell in the house of God rather than to reside in the tents and the city of the heretical accusers of the Christians".[55] Here, the ascetic rejection of worldly materiality is explicitly intertwined with the repudiation of iconoclastic policies. The text aims to establish a clear association between the monastic vocation and the iconodule position, as exemplified through the figure of Stephen. After Stephen's investiture with the monastic habit, his family departed from Mount Auxentios and returned to their residence in the city.

The young Stephen was instructed in monastic virtues under the guidance of John: ἐγκράτεια, σωφροσύνη, ἀγάπη, and ὑπομονή[56] (Auzépy, 2016, 104). One of his principal activities was providing water to the monastery of Trikhinareai, described conserving its discipline since its foundation by Auxentios. John, employing his gift of clairvoyance, foretold the impending destruction of the monasteries on the holy mount at the hands of Constantine V, referred to as "the new Babylonian" (Auzépy, 2016, 106), who is portrayed as the personification of iconoclasm and future persecutor of the saint. Following this prophecy, the narrative recounts the death and funeral of Stephen's father, an event that compelled the saint to lead his mother and sisters into the monastic community of Trikhinareai.

John's impending death is once again anticipated through a premonitory warning: βλέπε δὲ τοῦ ἐπερχομένου σοι κινδύνου τὸ πέρας[57] (Auzépy, 2016, 107). The term κίνδυνος refers not only to the imminent persecution by Emperor Constantine V —thereby preserving the Christian collective identity— but also subtly alludes to a

[54] The text literally says: πρὶν γενέσεως καὶ ἀπ' ἐμβρύων τετάχθαι αὐτὸν τῷ μοναδικῷ βαθμῷ (Auzépy, 2016, 103). My translation: "Even before birth, he was appointed to the monastic rank from the embryo".
[55] παραρριπτεῖσθαι ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ μᾶλλον ἢ οἰκεῖν ἐν σκηνώμασιν καὶ πόλει χριστιανοκατηγόρων αἱρετικῶν (Auzépy, 2016, 103).
[56] That is, respectively, continence, moderation, love and patience.
[57] My translation: "Watch out for the outcome of the danger approaching you".

deeper threat: the potential outbreak of widespread violence within Byzantine society. The sainthood, preserved and transmitted across generations through particularly pious individuals, is now conferred upon Stephen following the death of John. At this juncture, Stephen emerges as the next holy man, assuming the role of his mentor's successor not only through the inheritance of place but also by virtue of spiritual constitution and divine grace.[58] This moment in the narrative aligns with the mimetic reproduction of sanctity and spiritual ideals previously discussed, rendering the episode particularly amenable to a Girardian interpretive framework.

The hagiographer demonstrates a sustained engagement with biblical erudition, consistently drawing parallels between scriptural figures and the protagonist, Stephen. Notably, at this point, the comparison is made with Jared, the sixth descendant of Adam, as John is presented as the sixth ascetic to inhabit Mount Auxentios after saint Auxentios himself. Thus, Stephen would be his son, Enoch, "the champion of divine favor".[59] Following this, the conclusion of the extended section offers a specific insight into Stephen's new phase of life marked by grief, during which he exemplifies the full array of virtues associated with sanctity. His conduct aligns closely with the paradigm of saint Anthony, as previously outlined.[60]

In the subsequent sections, Stephen's commitment to monastic and ascetic practices intensifies. The establishment of a new monastery on the mountain, undertaken according to the alleged prescriptions of Auxentios, marked a significant development in the community's infrastructure, providing essential facilities and storage. Stephen's role as a spiritual leader extended beyond personal ascetic struggle against satanic temptation; it also served as a powerful magnet for new adherents, who are portrayed in the text as his spiritual "children".[61] Following a particular catechetical address to the monastic community, Stephen withdraws to the summit of the mountain during the winter, where he remains in isolation from the twenty disciples of the monastery. This unexpected retreat provokes concern among the other monks, who

[58] ὁ τίμιος Στέφανος καὶ τοῦ τρόπου καὶ τοῦ τόπου καὶ τῆς χάριτος ἐν διπλῷ καὶ μάλα περισσοτέρως κληρονόμος γνωρίζεται (Auzépy, 2016, 108). My translation: "The honorable Stephen is recongnized as an inheritor of his disposition, his location and his grace, in double measure and far greater still".
[59] τὸν τῆς εὐαρεστήσεως πρώταρχον (Auzépy, 2016, 108).
[60] See Appendix: Text 4 (pp. 66-67).
[61] The text employs two distinct terms, τέκνα and παῖδες, emphasizing their filial and dependent relationship to him. However, the simultaneous use of the term ἀδελφοί introduces a nuanced relational dynamic, portraying them as both spiritual equals and subordinates (Auzépy, 2016, 111–112).

question the apparent risk posed by such behavior. The episode, however, serves as an instructive moment, allowing Stephen to articulate the ascetic rationale behind his actions and to reinforce the spiritual principles underpinning his solitary practices.

The significant role of Anna, who joined the monastery of Trikhinareai following her conversion to monastic life under Stephen's spiritual guidance, has already been highlighted. Her narrative is embedded within the broader context of Stephen's growing influence among the Orthodox population of the city, many of whom were reportedly drawn to the holy mountain to seek his counsel.[62] Anna, having become a widow, undertakes a pilgrimage to this sacred site and requests a specific blessing from Stephen, ultimately embracing the ascetic lifestyle under his direction.[63]

At this point, the main narrative briefly transitions into an *excursus* that offers a detailed exposition on the iconoclastic controversy and the particular policies enacted by emperors Leo III and Constantine V. Before delving into this historical account, however, the hagiographer introduces an extensive catalogue of principal adversaries of the true Christian faith, those capable of "turning their household into a desert" (Auzépy, 2016, 118). Notably, this list —described by the editor as unusually long compared to analogous lists of this kind[64]— begins with the Jews and culminates with the figure of ὁ δυσσεβὴς Μάμεθ[65] (Auzépy, 2016, 118), thus aligning heresiological rhetoric with a broader polemical scope against a complex and constructed alterity mentioned previously. The section dealing with the reign of Leo III contains significant elements that perform this scapegoating mechanism against Jews and Muslims.[66] Leo's reign, and by extension the iconoclastic movement, is explicitly associated with the Devil, referred to as διάβολος, "the enemy" (Auzépy, 2016, 119). Moreover, this period is portrayed as one marked by chaos and violence, invoking imagery traditionally associated with warfare: a typical trait of a sacrificial crisis (Girard, 2023, 140). Leo's prior career as a military general becomes symbolically relevant, featuring his regime through force and conflict. In addition, his Syrian origins are cited in the text, serving as a marker to situate his ideological "deviation" within a so-called Semitic framework, implicitly associating it with Judaism and Islam. This ancestry thus serves to construct

[62] See Appendix: Text 5 (pp. 67-68).
[63] See Appendix: Text 6 (p. 68).
[64] See footnote 147 in Auzépy, 2016, 210.
[65] "The impious Muhammad".
[66] See Appendix: Text 7 (pp. 69-70).

a polemical genealogy of error, also reinforcing the otherness of iconoclasm within a Christian Byzantine worldview.

The subsequent period, under the reign of Constantine V, is depicted as one of intensified violence and upheaval, characterized by systematic persecution of monks specifically for their monastic identity and their alleged idolatry.[67] The condition of being a monk is here portrayed as inherently equivalent to being an iconodule, understood by imperial policy as idolatrous, thereby conflating monastic identity with doctrinal dissent. As previously noted and emphasized by Auzépy, this association likely lacks historical accuracy, yet it reveals the ideological slant of the hagiographical narrative, which is deeply entrenched in iconodule rhetoric. Despite its polemical nature and the evident iconodule bias present within this account, it offers valuable insight into the symbolic construction of the sacrificial crisis. Most notably, it frames the violence against monks and iconodules within the paradigm of sacrificial scapegoating.

Although the hagiographer presents them not practising genuine idolatry,[68] they are nonetheless targeted by the Emperor as culpable agents whose destruction is purportedly necessary for restoring order. This mechanism reflects a Girardian model in which arbitrary victims are blamed and eliminated to quell social unrest. The monks are referred to by the administration of Constantine V with pejorative terms such as ἀμνημόνευτοι and σκοτένδυτοι[69] (Auzépy, 2016, 120), and are even subjected to stoning if caught venerating an icon, an explicit manifestation of the scapegoating mechanism and the systematic vilification of the monastic and iconodule identity, presented as synonyms. Constantine V, in contrast, is depicted in overtly demonizing terms and is likened to scriptural antagonists such as Balaam and Balak. This rhetorical strategy serves to invert the logic of persecution: the true sacrificial victim, as constructed by the hagiographer, is not the monk or the iconodule community, but rather the personifications of iconoclasm itself, embodied by political figures like Leo III and Constantine V. These emperors, cast as persecutors of true Christians, are thus

[67] See Appendix: Tex 8 (p. 70).
[68] A specific passage within the text presents a deliberate defense of the iconodule theology of veneration, articulating a clear distinction between legitimate worship and the alleged idolatry. See Appendix: Tex 9 (p. 71).
[69] First, “those who may not be remembered” or “unmentionable”. Second, “those dressed in black”, a reference to their monastic garb.

assimilated into the typology of those who perpetuate the cycles of violence, echoing the narratives of early Christianity. They are accused of perpetuating an unjust scapegoating mechanism, one that ultimately fails to eliminate violence from society and instead reproduces it through cycles of persecution.

The iconoclastic council of Hieria is treated in a similarly condemnatory fashion, depicted as both heretical and diabolical. The Church is portrayed as fractured into two distinct factions, one of which remained steadfast in its adherence to orthodoxy and ultimately sought spiritual guidance on Mount Auxentios "amid these sorrows".[70] Stephen, the sanctified father to whom these appeals were addressed, gathered the faithful and delivered a substantial exhortation. The central message of his discourse may be encapsulated in the phrase: οὐδὲν γνώμης εὐσεβεῖν προαιρουμένης ἰσχυρότερον καὶ οὐδὲν δυνατώτερον ψυχῆς κακίᾳ δουλεύειν οὐ βουλομένης[71] (Auzépy, 2016, 122-123). The faithful are urged to maintain resolute resistance to the Emperor's policies, which are framed as being driven by malevolent forces. Failure to do so, the text warns, would result in the dissolution of the Church, understood both as the community of believers and as the institutional embodiment of faith, culminating in an interminable and destructive conflict directed by a φιλοπόλεμος δαίμων.[72] In this context, the narrative's alignment with the perception of an imminent sacrificial crisis, interpreted through a Girardian lens, becomes increasingly explicit and useful.

Nevertheless, the monastic community lacks any military capacity or strategic formation that would enable it to actively resist the imperial oppression. Consequently, Stephen's final directive to his followers is not one of confrontation, but rather of retreat: he advises them to flee and seek refuge in regions where resistance to the iconoclastic "infection" remains strong (Auzépy, 2016, 125). The three designated regions are the northern shores of the Black Sea, the easternmost coastline of the Mediterranean, and the southern half of the Italic peninsula. According to Stephen's counsel, it is preferable to become a stranger or foreigner in a distant land than to endure life under a tyrannical regime.

[70] Ἐν τούτοις τοῖς ὀδυνηροῖς (Auzépy, 2016, 122).
[71] My translation: "Nothing is stronger than a will that chooses to act piously, and nothing is more powerful than a soul that refuses to serve evil".
[72] A "war-loving demon". See Appendix: Tex 10 (pp. 71-72).

The subsequent chapters describe the convocation of a council held at the Church of Blachernae, a space that had already undergone significant modifications due to iconoclastic reforms. The account emphasizes the removal of all references to saints and biblical events, irrespective of the medium or artistic form in which they were represented. In their place, the church was adorned with vegetal and animal motifs, which, as the hagiographer pointedly remarks, offered no doctrinal instruction or spiritual edification.[73] Emperor Constantine V dispatched the patrician Kallistos to Mount Auxentios with the aim of compelling Stephen to endorse and sign the doctrinal definition produced by the iconoclastic council held at the Church of Blachernae. The saint's response is encapsulated in these two affirmations: αἱρετικῆς ὑπολήψεως ἐν τῷ ὅρῳ τῆς ψευδοσυνόδου ταύτης προτιθεμένης[74] and πρὸς δὲ καὶ τὴν τῶν ἱερῶν εἰκόνων προσκύνησιν εὐχερῶς μέλλω ἀποθνήσκειν[75] (Auzépy, 2016, 129).

This episode marks the saint's first direct confrontation with the iconoclastic policy and his initial interaction with the Emperor's authority. His uncompromising use of terms such as "heretical" (αἱρετικῆς) and "false-synod" (ψευδοσύνοδος) establishes a forceful rhetorical stance, underscoring his unwavering theological position and enacting a powerful form of resistance. The lack of hesitation in deploying such charged terminology reflects not only the depth of his conviction but also the broader polemical tone adopted by the hagiographer in defense of orthodoxy. Moreover, Stephen does not hesitate to express his willingness to die for this cause, thereby aligning himself with the ideal of sanctity in a twofold manner: first, by choosing what is framed in the text as divine truth over a worldly and erroneous fallacy; and second, by presenting himself as ready for martyrdom, a form of sacrifice portrayed not as punitive but as desirable for the true Christian. In this way, martyrdom becomes an identitarian affirmation and a rejection of the iconoclastic alterity.

Kallistos forcefully entered the holy cave of Auxentios and dragged Stephen out, despite the latter's total physical debilitation caused by prolonged abstinence and ascetic seclusion. As the saint and his monastic community began chanting liturgical prayers in veneration of the sacred icons, the patrician and his guards were compelled to temporarily abandon the mount for a week, being summoned to address the

[73] See Appendix: Tex 11 (p. 72).
[74] My translation: "there is an heretical belief contained in the definition of this false-synod".
[75] My translation: "for the veneration of the holy icons, I am ready to die willingly".

concurrent military conflict with the Bulgarians —here named Scythians (Auzépy, 2016, 131). Afterwards, Kallistos seized one of Stephen's disciples, Sergios, who was willing to betray his spiritual father, thus emulating the treachery of Judas Iscariot.[76] This episode enhances the mimetic dimension of *imitatio Christi*, aligning the narrative more closely with the Gospel account and portraying Stephen as an unjust scapegoat, mirroring the Passion of Christ. Such elements work to reframe the nature of sacrifice: from the wrongful victimization of the innocent, Stephen as a Christ-like figure, to the vilification of the violent and deceitful persecutors, such as Constantine and, in this particular case, Sergios. The latter, having defected to the imperial side, joined forces with a tax-collector to draft a formal denunciation of Stephen, portraying him as a morally compromised monk who actively corrupted others.[77] This point is particularly significant as it leads into the subsequent chapters.

The following sections detail how a patrician officer, sent by the Emperor, named Anthes, sought to intimidate[78] the nuns residing at the monastery of Trikhinareai, with particular focus on Anna, a patrician woman who had embraced monastic life after conversing with Stephen. Despite Anthes' efforts, the nuns collectively protect Anna and, together, they attend the summons issued by Constantine. In this context, Anna steadfastly remains loyal to Stephen, refusing to accept the charges leveled against him. She is imprisoned for her defiance, affirming that she knows a different Stephen, one vastly different from the accusations made against him.[79] The dual nature of Stephen's character, as presented in the internal discourse of the text, is framed through the tension between two representations of him: one authentic and the other fabricated by its heretical opposers. Within the framework of a sacrificial crisis, this dichotomy echoes the ambivalence of the sacrificial victim, who is simultaneously portrayed as the source of societal disorder and its redeemer, the plague and the god.

[76] ὁ δεύτερος Ἰσκαριώτης καὶ τῆς ἀγχόνης κληρονόμος, παντάπασι διὰ τοῦ δολίου χρυσίου σαρκικῶς εἰπεῖν ἐνδυθεὶς τὸν Σατανᾶν (Auzépy, 2016, 131). My translation: "the second Iscariot and heir of the noose, who totally clothed himself with Satan through deceitful gold to speak according to the flesh".
[77] See Appendix: Tex 12 (p. 73).
[78] The characterization of this event is particularly striking, as the hagiographer portrays it as a moment of intense violence and tragedy, culminating in the public flagellation of Anna. Notably, the term βαρβαρικῶς, that is "in a barbaric fashion", is employed to describe Anthes' aggressive intrusion into the monastery in search of Anna (Auzépy, 2016, 133). Furthermore, the atmosphere is rendered with dramatic tension, as the narrative states: θρύλου δὲ γεγονότος καὶ τῆς ὑμνῳδίας κατασιγασθείσης (Auzépy, 2016, 133), translated as "once the turmoil began, the hymnody was abruptly silenced", thus underscoring the rupture of sacred order by external violence..
[79] See Appendix: Tex 14 (pp. 74-75).

This paradoxical status, deeply rooted in the dynamics of mimetic rivalry, finds its theoretical grounding in Girard's notion of the double (Girard, 2023, 206). In this case, Constantine and Stephen emerge as mimetic antagonists, locked in a conflict in which desire is obsessively directed toward the rival, and violence becomes detached from any restorative purpose, functioning instead as a self-perpetuating mechanism rooted in the logic of scapegoating. Crucially, this conflict is asymmetrical: only Constantine actively seeks the culmination of violence, attempting to mobilize societal consensus to collectively assign guilt to Stephen.[80] This dynamic is exemplified by the treatment of Anna, who, after refusing to participate in the false accusation, undergoes what can be read as a form of public martyrdom —despite her death not being confirmed until the final chapters of the *Life* (Auzépy, 2016, 174-175). Her flogging until she appeared lifeless served both as an implicit public confirmation of her supposed guilt and as an explicit coercive act intended to extract a confession through overwhelming social pressure.[81] Her seemingly lifeless body was discarded in a unspecified monastery of Byzantium, highlighting that not all monastic communities were immune to Constantine's influence; some, in fact, operated under his direct authority.

The text suggests that the Emperor desires to receive the same devotion afforded to holy icons and, by extension, to God himself. This becomes explicit when he demands from George Synkletos an oath of absolute loyalty, even to the point of death.[82] George, who willingly accepts this oath, is then instructed to infiltrate Stephen's monastic community, only to later return to the imperial court. Although the saint recognized that George's beard style conformed to the courtly fashion —apparently mandated by imperial decree—, he nonetheless agreed to clothe him with τῆς ὑποταγῆς τὸ ἔνδυμα, the "garment of submission", for three days, thus admitting him into the lowest rank of the monastic order (Auzépy, 2016, 138). One of the most notable arguments advanced

[80] Because the logic followed by Constantine, like that of all Christian persecutors, is rooted in the primitive scapegoat mechanism, as explained by Girard. See the third part of the Introduction (pp. 22-30).

[81] The hagiographer explicitly states what Constantine intended: ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς ἔωθεν πλῆθος λαοῦ πρὸ τοῦ ἄστεος τῆς Φιάλεως ἐκκλησιάσας, ὡς νομίζων πείθειν αὐτήν, μέσον πάντων γυμνὴν παραστῆναι παρεκελεύσατο (Auzépy, 2016, 135). My translation: "The emperor, at dawn, having assembled a great crowd of people in front of Phiale's palace, for he believed it might persuade her, ordered that she be brought forth naked into the midst of them all".

[82] καὶ εὐχερῶς ἔχεις ὑπὲρ τῆς ἐμῆς ἀγάπης ἀποθνῄσκειν; (Auzépy, 2016, 136). My translation: "and are you readily willing to die for my love?"

by George in his attempt to persuade Stephen is the accusation that Constantine's iconoclastic policy constitutes a form of "judaizing".[83]

Meanwhile, the Emperor convened the populace at the hippodrome, and incited hatred against the monastic orders.[84] With this maneuver, the Emperor once again seeks to generate popular unanimity to legitimize the violent measures taken against Stephen, while simultaneously positioning himself as the champion within the ongoing mimetic conflict. He accuses the so-called "unmentionable" members of monastic orders not only of instigating intrigues and conspiracies but also of moral corruption and the worship of a false god. Furthermore, he laments that his envoy George has become an abbot, that proving that Stephen is plotting against him by recruiting members from within his trusted inner circle. After receiving the tonsure and being clothed with the holy monastic garment, George returns to the court as he had promised Constantine. The narrator suggests that George remains loyal to the Emperor. Despite his earlier inflammatory discourse before the people, Constantine is pleased to see his envoy in monastic attire, for in this act, he "found a pretext to kill the saint".[85]

Subsequently, the Emperor once again convenes the populace in the Hippodrome, where the monastic habit recently adopted by George becomes the object of both verbal and physical assault. As noted by the editor in a footnote, some scholars have interpreted this event symbolically.[86] The iconoclasts are here likened to the Jews, particularly in the parallel drawn between their collective denunciation of the habit and the biblical account of the crowd's condemnation of Christ. Thus, the destruction of the monastic garment serves as a symbolic Passion, a scapegoated object upon which the violence of society is unanimously deflected. This episode prefigures the redirection of this hostility toward a human target: the monastic order in general, and Stephen in particular. The mob is subsequently armed and dispatched to Mount Auxentios, where they attack and disperse the monastic community, violently casting their leader —Stephen— into the sea. The survivors, including Stephen, find refuge in a monastery in Chrysopolis, near Constantinople. Once settled, Stephen's disciples report

[83] The verb ᾽Ιουδαΐζω, "to side" or "imitate the Jews", appears only once within the *Life* (Auzépy, 2016, 138).
[84] See Appendix: Tex 15 (pp. 75-76).
[85] πρόφασιν εὑρεῖν ἀποκτεῖναι τὸν ἅγιον (Auzépy, 2016, 139).
[86] See footnote 267 (Auzépy, 2016, 236).

the events to the Emperor. In response, Constantine issues a decree threatening capital punishment to anyone who dares approach Mount Auxentios.[87]

Simultaneously, the Emperor assembles a group of high-ranking iconoclast clerics and commissions them as an official delegation to Chrysopolis. Their mission remains unchanged: to compel Stephen to endorse the theological definition adopted by the synod of Blachernai. Predictably, Stephen once again refuses, delivering a vehement speech denouncing both the Emperor's secular authority and the worldly entanglements of the imperial clergy. Demonstrating his characteristic command of biblical rhetoric, Stephen provokes a violent reaction: the envoys resort to physical assault, beating him until court officials, led by the previously mentioned patrician Kallistos, intervene. After cooling down the conflict, they present him with a final ultimatum: sign the synodal document or face death. Stephen, unwavering in his commitment, chooses martyrdom, declaring: *ἐμοὶ τὸ ζῆν Χριστὸς καὶ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν* ὑπὲρ τῆς ἁγίας αὐτοῦ εἰκόνος *κέδρος* καὶ δόξα[88] (Auzépy, 2016, 144).

Following an extensive and meticulously argued refutation of the council's self-designation as the "Seventh Holy Ecumenical Council"[89] Stephen challenges the legitimacy of each of these qualifiers, asserting that the synod was neither "holy," nor "ecumenical," nor the rightful "seventh" council (Auzépy, 2016, 144–145). After this forceful intervention, the imperial delegation returns to Constantinople, where they are compelled to report their failure to the Emperor. In response, Constantine condemns Stephen to exile on the island of Proconnesos, located in the Hellespont. Before departing, the saint is summoned by the abbot of the monastery, who, nearing death according to the attending physicians, wishes to bid him a final farewell. After this emotional parting, he travels to Proconnesos. Upon his arrival, he discovers a cave containing a sanctuary dedicated to Anna, the grandmother of Christ, a discovery he interprets as a sign of divine providence, and where he resolves to remain.

Stephen's disciples departed from Mount Auxentios and established a new monastic community on the island of Proconnesos. They were soon joined by the nuns of Trikhinareai, who came to remain near the saint, now forty-nine years of age. The

[87] See Appendix: Tex 16 (p. 76).
[88] My translation: "To me, to live is Christ, and to die for his holy icon is gain and glory". Italics indicate a biblical citation from Phil 1, 21.
[89] As Constantine of Nakoleia names it: "ὅρος τῆς ἁγίας καὶ οἰκουμενικῆς ἑβδόμης συνόδου" (Auzépy, 2016, 144).

narrative consistently emphasizes the numerical disparity between the two opposing groups: while the mob incited by Constantine comprises virtually the entire population of the capital, Stephen's supporters are limited to a small contingent from two monastic communities. This stark contrast directly evokes the dynamics of the scapegoat mechanism, characterized by unanimous collective violence against a singular or marginalized victim, a structure which Christian discourse aims to unmask and subvert. The sheer number of the persecutors is not equated with truth or moral superiority; rather, the narrative aligns righteousness with the minority, thus recalling the persecuted and clandestine nature of the early Christian community as portrayed in the Gospels.

A few sections —from §48 to §54 (Auzépy, 2016, 148-154)— are devoted to recounting the miracles attributed to Stephen during his exile on the island of Proconnesos, in accordance with conventional hagiographic practice. These episodes contribute significantly to the portrayal of the saint in the image of Christ, reinforcing the motif of *imitatio Christi*. As is typical of Byzantine hagiography, the miracles reflect well-established Gospel models, reproducing recurrent narrative patterns and character types. What distinguishes these miracles, however, is their iconodule orientation: four out of five are explicitly mediated through the icons of Christ and the Virgin, which Stephen possessed. The first miracle involves the healing of a man born blind, who regains his sight.[90] The second concerns the exorcism of a possessed child.[91] The third recounts the healing of a woman afflicted with chronic hemorrhage, echoing the Gospel archetype of the woman with the issue of blood.[92] The fourth miracle differs in form and content, as it describes a collective apparition of the saint to a group of sailors lost in a storm, guiding them safely to shore. A brief interlude then notes the deaths of Stephen's mother and sister. The fifth miracle functions as a narrative hinge, transitioning back to the main plot. A soldier, also named Stephen, arrives at Proconnesos, severely crippled and bent to the ground. After prostrating himself before the icons of Christ and the Virgin —an act shared by three of the previous miracle accounts—, he is miraculously healed. Upon returning to military service, he recounts his recovery due to the intervention of the holy icons. Accused of idolatry, he is

[90] Based on the analogue case performed by Jesus in John 9.
[91] This type is usual in hagiographies: see footnote 339 (Auzépy, 2016, 249).
[92] This miracle of curation is really typical in hagiography and it is based on Mark 5, 25-34.

summoned before the Emperor, where he recants his testimony and denies the sanctity of the images. As a result, he is rewarded with a promotion; yet, this apostasy immediately nullifies the divine intercession. On his journey home from the palace, he falls from his horse and suffers a fatal injury as a payment for his recantation.

The fact that Stephen's miraculous acts are mediated through icons is not incidental. Prior to performing the first miracle, he engages in a brief dialogue with the blind man—an exchange that functions as a theological clarification, emphasizing both the origin and the legitimacy of the miraculous power he is about to manifest.[93] Although Stephen's intervention is entirely composed of rhetorical questions, these are directly related to the theological foundations of the theory of images and the central issues of the iconoclastic controversy. The core of his argument is encapsulated in the line: τί τὸν κτίστην ἀφείς, πρὸς τὸ κτίσμα ἐλήλυθας;[94] (Auzépy, 2016, 149). This formulation affirms that matter, as a created entity, does not in itself possess divine power. In using these words, Stephen explicitly denies any intrinsic ability to perform miracles, asserting his status as a mere human. This theological framing reaffirms the cosmological hierarchy of Christian doctrine: saints are not divine beings, but human intermediaries between God and humanity. Likewise, icons are not venerated as objects in themselves, but function as conduits through which devotion is directed toward Christ, the Virgin, or the saints they depict. Through this brief yet pointed exchange, the hagiographer establishes the theological basis upon which the miracles narrated in the subsequent sections are constructed.

This same theme reemerges in the brief exchange between the Emperor and the saint, which clearly draws upon the long-standing tradition of apologetic dialogues, a literary form widespread in the early Christian period and later revived in Byzantine hagiography through the dialogue between Emperor Leo V and Patriarch Nicephoros, as preserved in the *Life of Nicephoros* (BHG 1335) (de Boor, 1880, 169-189; Fisher, 1998, 79-104). After being summoned by Emperor Constantine, the saint faces his interrogation prepared to defend his position using only an imperial coin as a rhetorical device. From the outset, the Emperor accuses him of idolatry, even in exile, and of undermining the orthodoxy of imperial religious policy. In response, Stephen articulates why the iconoclastic actions are impious, focusing particularly on the

[93] See Appendix: Tex 17 (p. 76).
[94] My translation: "why, leaving the creator, have you come to the creature?"

destruction of sacred icons. The Emperor counters by invoking the issues of materiality and divine creation, arguments previously raised during Stephen's dialogue with the blind man. Stephen's reply addresses the central theological tenet of the iconophile position: that veneration offered to an icon passes to the prototype it represents, and thus, the icon functions not as an object of worship in itself, but as a conduit to the divine model it signifies.[95] The Emperor rejects Stephen's argument without offering a substantive counterargument, a rhetorical deficiency that implicitly underscores the saint's intellectual and theological superiority. This imbalance is further emphasized in the illustrative exchange that follows. Stephen produces a coin bearing the Emperor's image and poses a provocative question: what would be the consequence if someone were to throw the coin to the ground and trample upon it? The Emperor replies unequivocally that such an act would be punishable, as it constitutes an affront not merely to the image, but to the Emperor himself. Seizing the moment, Stephen throws down the coin and deliberately tramples it. The hagiographer then highlights the Emperor's hypocrisy: despite dismissing the saint's theological reasoning, Constantine immediately treats the symbolic act as a crime against imperial authority and initiates legal proceedings against Stephen. This episode further substantiates the earlier observation that the Emperor seeks to appropriate for himself the same veneration traditionally reserved for holy icons and, by extension, for God. In doing so, the narrative suggests that Constantine's mimetic rivalry is not directed solely against Stephen —as a representative of the saints and a substitute of the icons—, but ultimately against the divine itself.

Upon his imprisonment, Stephen encounters 342 other monks also confined, many of whom, according to the text, had been blinded or otherwise mutilated due to their support for icon veneration. However, as the editor notes, such physical punishment may not have stemmed exclusively from the monastic persecution directed at Stephen.[96] Regardless of the specific causes, unanimously "all these fathers accepted him as chief shepherd and master of salvation",[97] recognizing in him an image

[95] One of Stephen's interventions in the dialogue with Constantine: Βασιλεῦ, οὐχὶ τῇ ὕλῃ οἱ χριστιανοὶ λατρεύειν ἐν εἰκόσι ποτὲ ἐθέσπισαν, ἀλλὰ τὴν κλῆσιν τῆς θέας προσκυνοῦμεν, νοερῶς εἰς τὰς αἰτίας τῶν πρωτοτύπων ἀναγόμενοι (Auzépy, 2016, 155). My translation: "O king, the Christians have never prescribed to worship the matter in icons, but we venerate the name of our glance, since we are mentally led up to the causes of their prototypes".

[96] See footnote 366 (Auzépy, 2016, 255).

[97] οἱ δὲ πατέρες οὗτοι πάντες ἐδέξαντο τοῦτον ὡς ἀρχιποιμένα καὶ καθηγητὴν σωτήριον (Auzépy, 2016, 156).

of God.[98] This collective acknowledgment by a community of purportedly orthodox monastics further solidifies the portrayal of Stephen as a Christ-like figure, reinforcing the *imitatio Christi*. From this point onward, the mimetic rivalry between Constantine and Stephen escalates, as the saint is now recognized as the very figure the Emperor aspires to become. Prior to this recognition, the distinction between the two remained relatively delineated, which may explain why the Emperor had not yet moved to formally judge, condemn, or execute Stephen. However, the narrative now positions both figures within the same symbolic framework: Constantine through his self-asserted claims to spiritual and divine authority, and Stephen through the veneration of his fellow ascetics.

The subsequent chapters unfold within the setting of imprisonment and begin with the account of a woman who, after demonstrating her devotion to icons, is permitted to provide sustenance to the saint. This episode is followed by testimonies from fellow inmates concerning the wider persecution of monastic communities across the empire. Antony of Crete recounts the martyrdom of the abbot Paul, characterizing his death through sacrificial terminology, specifically as a θῦμα, a "sacrifice" and a ὁλοκάρπωμα, a "whole burnt-offering" (Auzépy, 2016, 160). Similarly, the elder Theosteriktos of the monastery of Pelekete describes the brutal torture and death of thirty-eight monks and the incineration of their monastery by imperial forces (Auzépy, 2016, 161). The final narrative is offered by Stephen himself and recounts the fates of Peter of Blachernai and John of Monagria, both of whom were executed for defending icons of Christ (Auzépy, 2016, 162). These testimonies culminate in Stephen's theological reflection on martyrdom as the highest form of imitation of saints, and, by extension, of Christ.

Forewarned of his impending death through a premonitory vision received by his master John, the saint begins to prepare for martyrdom by instructing the woman to cease bringing him provisions. Despite this, numerous orthodox believers from the city continue to visit him in prison, seeking his blessing and spiritual instruction. During the celebration of the Brumalia, a so-called pagan festival associated with the winter solstice, followers of the Emperor accused Stephen of propagating idolatrous teachings

[98] ὡσεὶ Θεὸν γὰρ ἑώρακα τὸν νυνὶ καθειρχθέντα ἐν τῇ φυλακῇ Στέφανον τὸν τοῦ Αὐξεντίου (Auzépy, 2016, 156). My translation: "For, as if he were God, I have seen him who is now confined in prison, Stephen of the Mount Auxentios". This is a reference to Judg 13, 22.

among the populace. In response, Constantine dispatched an armed agent who interrogated the city's inhabitants and administered physical punishment to all individuals suspected of maintaining any association with monastics.

Although Constantine admits that executing Stephen would be the most expedient resolution, he simultaneously acknowledges that martyrdom is precisely what the saint desires. For this reason, he declares his intention to prolong Stephen's suffering and to end his life in the most cruel manner possible. Before resorting to this, however, the Emperor attempts once more to persuade the saint to yield. To this end, he dispatches two monastic brothers renowned for their virtue, dignity, and physical beauty. They are instructed to visit the prison and threaten Stephen with death unless he ceases to defy imperial authority. Despite this, the brothers are portrayed sympathetically by the hagiographer: upon their arrival, they are received with kindness and granted the saint's blessing. Unsurprisingly, Stephen remains resolute. Upon returning to the Emperor, the brothers fabricate a story claiming they had beaten the saint nearly to death. The narrative highlighted the Emperor's envy of their distinguished qualities, which ultimately drives him to order their execution.

Sensing that his death is imminent, Stephen chooses to face his execution without wearing his monastic garment, thereby preserving it from being tainted by the violence about to be inflicted upon him. The symbolic significance of this garment, already emphasized earlier in the narrative, now assumes a heightened meaning. Previously, it functioned as a surrogate victim, absorbing the fury of the enraged populace; in this moment, however, its value is acknowledged even by the opposing side, thus elevating it to the status of a universally recognized symbol. The monastic habit, imbued with the virtues and sanctity of the ascetic life, must be spared from the sacrificial death of its wearer, highlighting the garment as potential relic, a marker of spiritual authority and an object worthy of veneration in its own right.

Following this, the Emperor appears to lose control, exclaiming in a fit of rage that he is no longer the Emperor and that ἄλλος ὑμῶν ὁ βασιλεύς[99] (Auzépy, 2016, 169). This utterance marks the culmination of the crisis of differentiation: the symbolic boundary between Constantine and Stephen collapses, with the Emperor himself acknowledging the presence of a rival authority. In the logic of mimetic rivalry, the

[99] "Another is your king". See Appendix: Tex 18 (p. 77).

indistinction between the two figures culminates the conflict, making the sacrificial resolution inevitable. Thus, the mimetic mechanism proceeds as theorized: when the double becomes indistinguishable, the only means of restoring order is through scapegoating. In this case, Stephen, now perceived as the Emperor's mirror and rival, becomes the designated victim, and his martyrdom follows as the final act of the mimetic crisis.

The martyrdom of the saint occurs swiftly and is carried out by a frenzied group of the Emperor's atheist sympathizers. Among them, one individual described as possessed by Satan,[100] violently strikes the saint's head against the ground, resulting in his immediate death. The hagiographer subsequently narrates the death of the executioner, also attributed to demonic possession. This narrative device serves two key purposes: it removes the need for direct demonic retribution, as the executioner meets his end through superhuman justice, and it reinforces the theological message that such an act of violence against a recognized holy figure is inherently condemned. Nevertheless, the subsequent section of the narrative describes how the saint's body, even after death, undergoes a more conventional form of martyrdom. His corpse is subjected to mutilation, bloodshed, and stoning—ritualized acts that transform his death into a public spectacle of sacrificial violence. This posthumous treatment is explicitly defined as a ὁλοκάρπωμα[101] (Auzépy, 2016, 170). The act is presented as distancing from any previous pagan martyrdom against early Christian people.

Following the culmination of violent acts, the corpse of Stephen was discarded and interred in a burial ground reserved for pagans and the condemned. Prior to this, however, a devout man named Theodore retrieved a fragment of the saint's brain, preserving it as a sacred relic. In a further attempt to desecrate the saint's memory, his body was brought to the monastery where his surviving sister resided, with the intention of compelling her to participate in the stoning of his remains. Anticipating this profanation, she concealed herself and successfully evaded the mob. The text confirms that Stephen died at the age of fifty-three, on the 28th of November, a date

[100] τις τῶν ἀθέων (...) ὅλος ἐν ἑαυτῷ ἐνδεδυμένος τὸν Σατανᾶν (Auzépy, 2016, 169). My translation: "One of the atheists (...) being completely possessed by Satan".
[101] Meaning "whole burnt-offering", the same word used to define the martyrdom of the abbot Paul (Auzépy, 2016, 160).

that coincided with one of the significant celebrations of the Brumalia festival due to Constantine's final decision.

A few posthumous miracles are recorded, alongside an account of the relic's fate. The fragment of Stephen's brain was secretly enshrined in a chapel dedicated to the protomartyr Stephen within a Constantinopolitan monastery. Following accusations of iconodulism, Theodore was exiled to Sicily and subsequently disappeared from historical memory. The hegumen of the monastery, one of the few privy to the relic's location, was imprisoned after admitting to the Emperor the existence of a chest containing the sacred fragment. Yet when imperial forces attempted to confiscate the chest, it miraculously vanished without a trace. The narrative closes with brief references to the nun Anna and the commissioner Epiphanios, followed by a direct address to the saint. In this final apostrophe, the hagiographer, Stephen the Deacon, exalts the martyr as the true imitator of Christ's Passion, venerating him as the unwavering defender of the holy icon and a radiant beacon dispelling the darkness of heresy. With this address, the *Life of Stephen the Younger* concludes.

3. How to understand the violence against sacred images and monks

Traditional scholarship on the iconoclastic controversy has tended to privilege a limited set of interpretive frameworks, often leaving critical gaps in our understanding of the period. Chief among these is the enduring question: why destroy icons? As discussed above, the Byzantine identity was rooted in a dual claim to universality—first, as heirs to the Roman Empire; second, as the sole bearers of true Christianity. This self-perception began to fracture during the iconoclastic period, particularly as Islam emerged as a competing universalist faith with shared Semitic origins and deep ties to the Abrahamic tradition. The notion of being a "chosen people" became synonymous with the idea of a "chosen empire", where military success was interpreted as divine favor (Bravo García, 1999, 93). Theophanes the Confessor, one of the principal historical sources for this period, recounts how Emperor Leo III understood the volcanic eruption of Thera and Therasia as a divine sign of disfavor—an omen that allegedly precipitated his iconoclastic policies (de Boor, 1883, 404–405; Turtledove, 1982, 96–97). This narrative, however, stems from a strongly iconodule perspective and is embedded in a polemical agenda aimed at delegitimizing the iconoclasts.

As many scholars have pointed out, iconoclasm remains an "inconclusive" episode (Brown, 1973, 26), a dark and ambiguous period largely due to the scarcity and partiality of surviving sources. While its causes are still widely debated and far from clear, its consequences are more readily traceable in the subsequent course of Byzantine history.[102] Scholarly efforts to explain iconoclasm have often relied heavily on iconodule sources, treating them as neutral historical accounts rather than ideologically driven narratives. For instance, iconoclasm has been interpreted as a pretext for imperial confiscation policies, a view partially challenged by archaeological evidence, even in relation to Yazid's edict —allegedly the source of this policy (Sahner, 2017). As Gero (1997, 246) argues, economic benefit may have been a by-product of iconoclastic policy, rather than its primary aim. Other explanations have framed iconoclasm as a belief commonly held among the military ranks, suggesting that its promotion may have served to secure their loyalty more effectively (Alexander, 1958, 111–125). Still others have proposed connections to heterodox religious movements or proto-nationalist tendencies within the empire, interpretations later revised and generally discredited due to lack of conclusive evidence (Jones, 1959).

In any case, many interpretations have tended to reproduce the binary logic inherent in the primary sources, which constructed iconoclasts, alongside Muslims and Jews, as religious and political "others" in opposition to a "pure" Christian orthodoxy. It is crucial not to overdetermine or "over-explain" the causes of a phenomenon, particularly when the sources are scarce and numerous hypotheses already exist (Brown, 1973, 3). This study, as previously stated, approaches a specific literary work as a reflection of a broader cultural and social conflict marked by religion and violence. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, the text articulates at least three interwoven conflicts: the iconoclastic rejection of sacred images; the opposition between civil authorities and secular clergy on one side, and the monastic community on the other; and, as a symbollic performance of the previous, the confrontation between the emperor Constantine V and saint Stephen. The destruction of icons is framed as a heretical innovation within Christian practice, targeting objects of veneration. This

[102] This is not the place to fully engage with that debate, but, as Martin has argued, iconoclasm contributed to the eventual breach with the Western Church and served as a catalyst for a revival of Byzantine intellectual development (1930, 3-4).

ideological attack reveals a scapegoat mechanism initially directed at sacred images, which subsequently escalates into persecution and destruction of persons.

As previously noted, René Girard coined the expression *sacrificial crisis* to describe a specific form of societal breakdown, particularly as it pertains to religious and ritual structures. Such a crisis emerges when traditional mechanisms of ritualized violence, especially scapegoating, lose their efficacy. In Girard's view, rituals function to contain and redirect communal aggression through the unanimous designation of a scapegoat, whose perceived guilt justifies the collective violence enacted upon them. However, when the community no longer believes in the guilt of the scapegoat, the coherence of the sacrificial structure collapses, resulting in unbounded and indiscriminate violence. Christianity, according to Girard, irrevocably disrupted this structure by revealing the innocence of the ultimate scapegoat: Christ. This event not only exposed the injustice of the sacrificial mechanism but also inaugurated a new form of sacrifice, one that retains the symbolic structure of sacrifice while inverting its logic, placing the innocent victim at the center of redemption rather than punishment. This chapter argues that the iconoclastic controversy, the persecution of monks —or monachomachy—, and the eventual restoration of icons through the so-called Triumph of Orthodoxy, can be understood within the theoretical framework of a sacrificial crisis. These events reflect a societal and theological rupture wherein traditional systems of religious authority and representation failed, unleashing a wave of violence that was ultimately resolved through the symbolic reaffirmation of orthodoxy and its iconodule practices.

My central thesis is that Byzantine society experienced a sacrificial crisis, and iconoclasm emerged as an attempted resolution. Since the Heraclian religious controversies and the rise of Islam, internal violence had been escalating within the empire, a form of unrest that threatened to dissolve social cohesion and unleash undifferenciated violence. This inference, which can be drawn from sources like Theophanes, is critically addressed in the *Life of Stephen the Younger*, a text that aims to discredit iconoclasm as a failed sacrificial strategy. The *Life* follows the neotestamentary example that the scapegoating of individuals or objects does not resolve collective crises because, fundamentally, the victims are innocent. This notion lies at the heart of Christianity's redefinition of sacrifice as exposed by Girard: the new sacrifice works in favour of the victim and exposes the illegitimacy of the persecutor.

It still sanctifies the sacrificial victim, but the blame and the *damnatio* come to the executioner.

The *Life* repeatedly stages episodes where collective ritualised aggression erupts against targeted figures, often marked by "primitive" sacrifice. A notable example is the episode involving a group of pious women —allegedly inspired by God— who attacked an officer for removing the icon of Christ at the Chalke Gate.[103] This symbolic act of resistance, culminating in the officer's death, the harassment of Patriarch Anastasios, and the women's eventual martyrdom under Constantine V, exemplifies a narrative that refuses to legitimize icons as valid scapegoats. To a portion of society — that is why they are a group—, icons were not mere images but sacred presences; their destruction represented an illegitimate form of violence. The Emperor's response reveals the mimetic dynamics of this sacrificial crisis: initial aggression directed at sacred objects is later deflected onto living scapegoats, in this case, ascetics and monks. Similar logic underpins the testimonies of Stephen's fellow inmates, who recount the violent suppression of monastic communities across the empire. The martyrdoms of the abbot Paul and the thirty-eight monks of Pelekete, as well as the accounts of Peter of Blachernai and John of Monagria as retold by Stephen himself,[104] reinforce this pattern of redirected violence aimed at neutralizing a perceived threat to imperial authority and unity.

The clearest and most symbolic example of this deflection is the destruction of George's monastic garment by an enraged mob at the amphitheatre, incited by Constantine himself.[105] This scene represents a ritualized act of unanimous violence, initially directed at an object imbued with sacred value. The community, gripped by mimetic crisis, channels its collective aggression onto a scapegoated victim, that is the garment. But the text seeks to render this sacrifice as unstable and unjust. As expected, the symbolic act soon collapses into real violence against monastic community: the crowd burnt down Stephen's monastery after violently scattering its members, and pushed him down the slope towards the sea. This progression from symbolic aggression to physical violence illustrates how mimetic mechanisms are embedded within the narrative, functioning as both a testimony to and a ritualization of a sacrificial crisis—

[103] See Appendix: Text 3 (pp. 65-66).
[104] For the Greek text: Auzépy, 2016, 160-162. For the French translation: Auzépy, 2016, 258-260.
[105] For the Greek text: Auzépy, 2016, 139-141. For the French translation: Auzépy, 2016, 235-237.

a pattern likely common to many hagiographies. In the mimetic context of substitutive violence, it is common to replace the real victim with a symbolic one who takes on the original's role within a dramatized sacrificial framework. Martyrs, of course, imitate and substitute Christ in ritualized versions of this foundational violence, constituting the hagiographical topic of *imitatio Christi*. In the *Life*, certain holy objects are presented as potential substitute victims that do not suffice in their purpose. What remains unclear, however, is whether icons substituted for monks or vice versa. The narrative seems to suggest that icons were the intended primary and inanimate victims, but that violence eventually deflected onto monks due to their perceived role as defenders of these images —probably also due to the inconclusive character of that first substitution.

Several notable passages in the Life of Stephen the Younger expose a Christian conception of sacrificial crisis and, through intertextual resonances, highlight the role of hagiography in articulating this theme. The hagiographer, Stephen the Deacon, devotes particular attention to depicting the horrors of the first iconoclastic period. His critique of Leo III's reign is included in full in the appended section,[106] while his condemnation of Constantine V is more embedded within the narrative.[107] In both cases, the διάβολος, literally "the enemy" and a common synonym for the Devil, is identified as the ultimate instigator of civil strife and violence. Within the Christian worldview, as reflected in this text, the Devil is portrayed as the corrupting "father" of humanity, implicating all people in an inherited sinful nature, although created in the image of God. Only by adhering to divine instruction can this violent inheritance be restrained. This notion mirrors Girard's conception of religion as a cultural mechanism that contains and defers violence through prohibitions, moral codes, and ritualized forms of sacrifice. Prohibitions often derive from the sacrificial process itself, and here the main source of prohibitions are the emperors.[108] According to the mimetic framework, religion serves to shield society from undifferentiated violence by channeling it through sanctioned or "good" violence. In this context, the Emperor attempts to define what constitutes legitimate violence —namely, the destruction of icons and the persecution of monastic communities— in the context of a sacrificial crisis. However, the narrative of the *Life of Stephen the Younger* tries to reveal that this

[106] See Appendix: Text 7 (pp. 69-70).
[107] See Appendix: Text 8 (p. 70).
[108] The *Life* does not limit its critique to the prohibition of icons alone, but also references other cases of coercive legislation during the first iconoclastic period. For instance, see Appendix: Text 16 (p. 76).

sacrificial mechanism is not only illegitimate but also counterproductive, as it generates further violence rather than containing it.

Consequently, violence is depicted as emanating from the Emperor or his agents. This detail is far from incidental; it reflects a deeply rooted political theology wherein the Byzantine Emperor is portrayed as the terrestrial reflection of divine authority, an earthly counterpart to the heavenly kingdom. Pious sovereigns were often treated in literary terms as analogous to saints, as exemplified in hagiography and secular biography (Alexander, 1940; Fernández, 2024, 51-52; Vinson, 1998, 473-475). It is also due to the inner Christian dichotomy between an ἔπαινος —"praise"— of the hero/saint and a ψόγος —"blame"— of the enemy (Alexander, 1940, 196). Through this dual construction, the mimetic doubles appear necessarily as a culmination of a crisis. The sacralization of imperial authority is predicated upon the Emperor's role as an *imitator Christi*, particularly in his function as "living law" (Dagron, 2003, 19-21). However, the existence of saints poses a latent challenge to the legitimacy of imperial authority (Dagron, 2003, 229-235). Unlike the Emperor, whose imitation of Christ is mediated through his legal and political function, saints embody Christ-like virtues through ascetic renunciation, charitable action, and identification with the marginalized. This divergence in modes of *imitatio Christi* illustrates the abovementioned paradox of the triumphant yet suffering God, a paradox that René Girard, among others, has emphasized (1987, 156).

Despite their spiritual authority, ascetics remained physically and socially distanced from the centers of political power. Their deliberate withdrawal from the urban life, whether through hermitic solitude or life in small monastic communities, produced a kind of social estrangement, as the *Life* evinces. This defamiliarization often rendered monks and nuns liminal figures, perceived as existing outside the conventional boundaries of civic life, and probably as unproductive in comparison to the iconoclastic main social component —soldiers and civil officers. This estrangement was common to the use of icons, that eventually received less attention and left many pilgrimage centers in Asia Minor deserted (Brown, 1973, 26). In the context of a sacrificial crisis, these figures could be easily accepted as sacrificeable victims by unanimous consensus, and that is presented in Constantine's iconoclastic view. Since there is no evidence of a strong monastic opposition to iconoclasm (Auzépy, 2016, 34-37), nor anything that proves earlier persecutions against monks during the reign of

Leo III (Gero, 1997, 242), it should be concluded that monachomachy has been "Constantine's own private crusade" (Gero, 1997, 247).

In the *Life*, the central conflict is personified through its two opposing figures: Constantine and Stephen. However, their relationship is neither reciprocal nor symmetrical. The Emperor is portrayed as obsessively committed to the destruction of icons, the persecution of iconodules, and the execution of monastic communities. In contrast, Stephen remains devoted to his ascetic life, focused on prayer and spiritual contemplation. This asymmetry reflects Girard's interpretation of Christianity as a non-violent sacrificial system (Wandinger, 2013, 135). Constantine functions as the mimetic double who embodies the dominant force seeking the elimination of its counterpart —Stephen. This dynamic reflects a typical pattern within mimetic rivalry, wherein the more powerful agent mobilizes communal consensus to legitimize the scapegoating of the weaker party, as developed above. Within the *Life*, the public assemblies in the amphitheatre of the Hippodrome exemplifies this collective endorsement of violence.[109]

Nevertheless, the Emperor's actions suggest a more nuanced intention than the mere elimination of his mimetic rival. Initially, Constantine appears to adopt a measured stance toward Stephen. For instance, the delegation of bishops dispatched to the monastery at Chrysopolis culminates in Stephen being physically assaulted by iconoclastic clerics, followed by threats from the Emperor's patrician officials (Auzépy, 2016, 143–144). Following this episode, and after the destruction of Stephen's monastery had already forced the monastic community to abandon the outskirts of Constantinople, Constantine orders Stephen's exile to a more remote location. The strategy of isolating the scapegoat from the community is a recurring motif in sacrificial logic, most famously analyzed by Girard through the example of Oedipus: the expulsion of the victim is thought to restore communal harmony.

In this context, Stephen's exile coincides with the performance of miraculous acts, which appear to affirm the restorative function of his removal, although only in a qualified and partisan manner. The miracles benefit those who support and venerate the icons, many of whom travel to visit him in exile. This restorative effect is thus not

[109] See, for instance, the Appendix: Tex 15 (pp. 75-76). Moreover, Constantine appears to require a pretext to execute Stephen, a point made evident when his subordinate George returns with a monastic garment, following the command of the emperor (Auzépy, 2016, 139).

communal, but rather limited to the iconodule faction. The fifth miracle in particular illustrates this distinction: a soldier is healed by Stephen but later denies the efficacy of icons in front of Constantine. As a consequence, he suffers a retributive fall from his horse, effectively nullifying the miracle and reinforcing the notion that divine favor is conditional upon the proper veneration of sacred images.

However, the mimetic dynamic between emperor and saint diverges sharply from the archetypal patterns of primitive, ritualized sacrifice. The structural symmetry between the mimetic doubles is absent. There is no mutual or reciprocal violence. Instead, the agent of persecution is dehumanized in the narrative, likened to an irrational or beastly force[110] —a trope common in sacrificial traditions, where animals are substituted for foundational victims in ritual reenactments. Conversely, the victim (Stephen) willingly embraces death and is portrayed as entirely innocent, thus subverting the sacrificial mechanism and aligning with the Christian reconfiguration of the scapegoat motif. Thus, Christian scheme of the mimetic conflict actively supports the weaker part of the rivalry and punishes the strong, associated to the imperial forces and secular or political power.

The moment at which the crisis reaches its apex is marked by the symbolic eradication of difference —a hallmark of the sacrificial crisis as defined by Girard. This culmination unfolds progressively. First, Stephen's imprisonment serves as the initial inversion, whereby the jailed ascetic becomes recognized by his fellow inmates as a divine-like figure, fulfilling the *imitatio Christi*. This directly contrasts with Emperor Constantine's own aspirations to divine veneration.[111] Second, popular legitimacy shifts further when citizens begin to enter the prison, seeking spiritual counsel and contact with Stephen, indicating a broader communal endorsement of his sanctity. Third, Stephen's resolute refusal to comply with imperial demands —even in the face of intermediaries who are themselves described as pious and ultimately align with the iconodule cause—further isolates Constantine. These envoys, who deceive the Emperor secretly defending Stephen, are subsequently executed, emphasizing their moral

[110] Throughout the *Life*, Emperor Constantine V is referred to using a variety of derogatory designations, often aligned with scriptural antagonists. In addition to being likened to figures of biblical enmity, he is also frequently compared to wild animals, and ultimately to a dragon. This is a rhetorical strategy common in hagiographic polemic to dehumanize the persecutor.

[111] Indeed, the emperor engages in a significant dialogue with his subordinate George, wherein he requests that George die for him, thus emulating the monks' and Stephen's desire to die for God (Auzépy, 2016, 136-137).

allegiance to the saint. Finally, in fourth place, the narrative reaches its climactic moment when Constantine, in a moment of madness, publicly declares that he is no longer the Emperor, for "another one" —Stephen— has been chosen by the people.[112] This admission marks the final stage of the crisis, triggering the ritualized violence against the saint's body and initiating his martyrdom.

4. Conclusions

As Brown posed it, "the Iconoclast controversy was a debate on the position of the holy in Byzantine society" (1973, 5). And following Girard, what is more sacred than violence? (2023, 90). By examining the *Life of Stephen the Younger*, a key hagiographical work from the period, I have described how the destruction of icons was not merely a theological dispute but a profound societal crisis. Even the slightest shift in defining what constitutes religion and its role within a community can significantly reshape the analysis and offer deeper insight into a historical period. Often, and especially in contemporary academia, disciplines risk becoming isolated from one another, a tendency that runs counter to the scientific and philosophical spirit in its etymological sense.

The figure of Stephen the Younger represents the inversion of the sacrificial logic that underpins the iconoclastic period. By embracing death as a witness to the truth of Christ and the sanctity of icons, Stephen becomes a symbolic Christ-like paradigm whose sacrifice exposes the illegitimacy of the Emperor's violence. This process, highlighted by the gradual escalation from symbolic aggression against icons to physical violence against monks and ascetics, underscores the dynamics of a sacrificial crisis that exposed its challenges emulating the previous crisis: the early Christian persecutions. In addition, previous philological and historical scholarship situates this *Life* within the broader hagiographical tradition, not only through its use of literary topoi and scenes derived from earlier works, but also through its engagement with the specifically Christian mode of ritualizing violence.

As the violence deflects from objects to persons, the iconoclastic narrative reveals the inherent instability of sacrificial logic, where even the intended victims —whether sacred images or monks— fail to satisfy the demands of the community's collective

[112] See Appendix: Text 18 (p.76).

aggression, for they do not deserve that punishment and need to be substituted. Constantine's policy is portrayed as being inspired by the Devil, whose influence is depicted as fostering conflict by embodying the destructive force of sin through violence. The mimetic conflict that the Emperor instigates highlights the anxiety of the Byzantine Church regarding its potential subjugation to imperial authority (Dagron, 2003). This tension is further explored in the later development of patriarchal hagiography, which reflects the evolving tensions between religious and imperial power (Fernández, 2024).

Furthermore, the very association of iconoclasm with Islam and Judaism, two religions that share a common background with Christianity, demonstrates that the redirection of violence within the Christian sacrificial system is as much concerned with the construction of memory and the dissemination of propaganda against alterity as it is with the internal sacrificial logic targeting members of the community, that is martyrdom. Although the text does not explicitly criticize Islam, it does reference Jews in certain instances, presenting them as a paradigm allegedly imitated by the iconoclasts in their persecution of iconodule monks—parallels that are consistently framed through the lens of Christ's Passion. These allusions, however, underscore the broader function of hagiographical literature in shaping and reinforcing a pre-existing identitarian framework.

This study has demonstrated, as many scholars did before, that Byzantine Iconoclasm not only transcended its traditional characterization as a purely theological dispute, but also drew attention to the prominent role of religion in society and the relevance of the sacred within the public management of violence. By reframing hagiography as both edifying literature and a ritual reenactment of sacrifice, akin to the cathartic function of Greek tragedy, the analysis highlights how martyr narratives transcended piety to reaffirm performatively a certain Christian identity. The political implications of these findings emphasize the need for further interdisciplinary re-examination of ninth-century hagiographies. Such an approach could uncover how doctrinal disputes functioned as proxies for deeper sociopolitical fissures.

5. Appendix: An anthology of Greek texts with an English translation.

Text 1. (§1)

Address to Epiphanius (Auzépy, 2016, 87)

Τῷ τιμιωτάτῳ καὶ ἀληθῶς ἐναρέτῳ πατρὶ πνευματικῷ ἀββᾶ Ἐπιφανίῳ πρεσβυτέρῳ καὶ ἡγουμένῳ, θεαρέστως ἡσυχάζοντι ἐν τῷ τοῦ ὁσίου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Αὐξεντίου θαυμαστῷ καὶ ψυχοσώστῳ προσαγορευομένῳ βουνῷ καὶ πάσῃ τῇ κατ' αὐτὸν θεοφρουρήτῳ ποίμνῃ, [περί τε τοῦ βίου πολιτείας τε καὶ ἀθλήσεως τοῦ παμμάκαρος καὶ ὁσιομάρτυρος πατρὸς ἡμῶν Στεφάνου τοῦ νέου, ὑπὲρ τῆς τῶν ἁγίων καὶ σεπτῶν εἰκόνων προσκυνήσεως ἐκ τῶν αὐτόθι ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει μαρτυρήσαντος ὑπὸ Κωνσταντίνου τοῦ Κοπρωνύμου, τοῦ δυσσεβοῦς χριστιανοκατηγόρου καὶ εἰκονοκαύστου τυράννου, λεχθέντα δὲ ὑπὸ Στεφάνου διακόνου τῆς ἐν Βυζαντίῳ ἁγιωτάτης τοῦ Θεοῦ μεγάλης ἐκκλησίας,] ἐν κυρίῳ χαίρειν

Translation

To the most honorable and truly virtuous spiritual father, abbot Epiphanios, presbyter and hegumen, who lives in stillness on the wondrous and soul-saving mountain named after our holy father Auxentios, and to all the flock protected by God through him, [concerning the life, the constitution, and the trial of the all-blessed and holy martyr father Stephen the Younger, who went through martyrdom inside Constantinople due to his veneration of the holy and revered icons by Constantine Copronymos, the impious tyrant, accuser of Christians and image burner, as accounted by Stephen, the deacon of the Great Church of God, the most holy in Byzantium], rejoice in the Lord.

Text 2 (§4)

Infertility, the Icon of the Virgin, and Original Sin: The Miraculous Conception of Stephen (Auzépy, 2016, 92-93).

Θεωρήσασα δὲ ἡ τούτων πανευσεβὴς μήτηρ λοιπὸν τὸν χρόνον προσρέοντα καὶ τὰ γυναικῶν πρὸς στείρωσιν αὐτῆς ἐγγίζοντα, ἤσχαλλεν καὶ ἐδυσφόρει παιδίον ἄρρεν οὐκ ἔχουσα. Ἀδιστάκτῳ δὲ πίστει φερομένη καὶ ἀναλογισαμένη τήν τε Σάραν καὶ Ἄνναν καὶ Ἐλισάβετ, καὶ τὸ γραφικὸν ἐκεῖνο ἐν νῷ λαβοῦσα ὅτι ὁ ζητῶν εὑρήσει καὶ τῷ κρούοντι ἀνοιγήσεται, τὴν ὁμώνυμον Ἄνναν μιμεῖται· Ἄννα γὰρ καὶ ταύτῃ τὸ ὄνομα. Καὶ ὥσπερ

ἐκείνη ἐν τῇ νομικῇ σκηνῇ, οὕτω καὶ αὕτη οὐ διέλειπεν τοὺς σεβασμίους οἴκους τῆς παναχράντου μητρὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ περιπολοῦσα, μάλιστα δὲ ἐν τῷ πανσέπτῳ αὐτῆς ναῷ τῷ ἐν Βλαχέρναις τὸ καθ' ἑκάστην συχνάζουσα, καὶ ἀνελλιπῶς ἐν τῇ κατὰ παρασκευὴν ὀψίας ἐννύχῳ γινομένῃ δοξολογικῇ ἀγρυπνίᾳ, δεήσεις προσφέρουσα εὐκτικὰς καὶ πρὸς ἀντικρὺ ἱσταμένη τοῦ ταύτης ἁγίου χαρακτῆρος, ἐν ᾧ ἐτετύπωτο ἐν ἀγκάλαις τὸν υἱὸν καὶ Θεὸν φέρουσα, πρὸς τὴν κοινὴν τοῦ γένους ἡμῶν σωτηρίαν καὶ ἐπίκουρον δακρυρροοῦσα τοιῶσδε, καὶ λέγουσα·

«Ἡ τῶν ἐν σοὶ προστρεχόντων σκέπη, Θεοτόκε, καὶ τῶν ἐν λύπῃ σε ζητούντων ἄγκυρα καὶ προστάτις, ὁ τῶν ἐξ ἀθυμίας τῷ τοῦ βίου πελάγει καταβυθιζομένων σωστικώτατος λιμὴν καὶ τῶν ἐν ἀπογνώσει σε αἰτούντων εἰς βοηθὸν ἐπίκουρος ἑτοιμότατος, ἡ τῶν μητέρων δόξα καὶ τῶν θυγατέρων καλλώπισμα, ἡ παντὸς τοῦ θήλεως τὸ ὀνειδιστικὸν τῆς προμήτορος Εὔας κατάκριμα εἰς παρρησίαν εὐφρόσυνον μεταβαλοῦσα τῷ θεανθρώπῳ σου τόκῳ, ἐλέησόν με καὶ ἐπάκουσον καὶ ῥῆξον τὸν ἐν ἐμοὶ δεσμόν, καθάπερ τῆς σῆς γεννητρίας Ἄννης ἐν τῷ τίκτεσθαί σε, καὶ δεῖξον τῇ μητρικῇ σου πρεσβείᾳ τεκεῖν με παιδίον ἀρρενικὸν ὅπως τῷ υἱῷ σου καὶ Θεῷ τοῦτο δοτὸν προσάξω.»

Τοῦτο δισσεύσασα καὶ τρισσεύσασα ἡ γυνή, ἐν μιᾷ τῆς εὐχῆς, βαλλούσης τὴν προσσυνήθη γονυκλισίαν, ἀφύπνωσεν. Ἡ δὲ ταχίστη εἰς βοήθειαν τοῦ γένους ἡμῶν μητρικῶς τὸν τοῦ Υἱοῦ ἐπικάμψασα ἔλεον τὴν ἀθυμοῦσαν γυναῖκα εἰς εὐθυμίαν μητρικὴν μετέβαλεν τρόπῳ τοιῷδε· τὴν γὰρ γυναῖκα ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ ὡς ἐν ὁράματι ἐπιστᾶσα ὁμοιοπλάστως τῆς προγεγραμμένης εἰκόνος καὶ ταύτης τὴν ψόαν πατάξασα, ἀνέστησεν εἰρηκυῖα· «Ἄπιθι χαίρουσα, γύναι· υἱὸν γὰρ ἔχεις». Ἡ δὲ διαναστᾶσα καὶ προσθορυβηθεῖσα καθ' ἑαυτήν, πρὸς τὸ τέλος εὗρε τὴν δοξολογικὴν ἀγρυπνίαν καὶ οἴκαδε ὑμνῳδῶς ὑποστρέψασα, συνέλαβεν ἐν γαστρί.

Translation

When the most pious mother of all saw the remaining time passing and the approaching signs common to women towards her sterility, she grew distressed and sorrowful at not having borne a male child. But, carried along by unwavering faith and recalling Sarah, Anna, and Elizabeth, taking to heart that scriptural saying: "He who seeks shall find, and to him who knocks it shall be opened", she imitated her namesake Anna, for Anna was also her name. Just as that one did in the tent of the Law, so too did this one continually go about the venerable houses of the wholly undefiled mother of

God. Mostly, she would frequent her most holy church in Blachernai every day, and without fail would attend the glorifying nightly vigil held every Friday evening, offering fervent supplications, and standing directly before her holy image, wherein she had been depicted holding her Son and God in her arms. She also wept for the communal salvation and succour of our race as follows, saying:

"O Theotokos, protector of those who take refuge in you, anchor and guardian of those who seek you in sorrow, most saving harbor for those who are overwhelmed by the sea of life's despondency, most ready helper of those who ask for your aid in despair, glory of mothers and adornment of daughters, you who through your divine-human birth transformed into joyful boldness the reproachful condemnation of our first mother Eve for all womankind, have mercy on me, hear me, and break the bond within me, just as you did for your own mother Anna at your conception. And by your maternal intercession, grant me to bear a male child, that I may offer him as a gift to your Son and God".

Having repeated this act twice and a third time, the woman, in the midst of her prayer and while casting herself down in her accustomed prostration, fell asleep. And she who maternally comes swiftly to the call of our race bends the mercy of her Son, and transformed the hopeless woman into maternal hope in the following manner: stood by the woman in that very hour, as if it was a vision, similarly to the aforementioned icon, after striking her loins, she raised her up, saying: 'Go forth rejoicing, woman, for you bear a son'. Awaking, the woman was overwhelmed, and, after making her way to the end of the glorifying vigil, she returned home singing hymns, and conceived in her womb.

Text 3 (§10)

The attack of inspired women, the assassination of the guardsman and the women's martyrdom after the removal of the icon of the Chalké (Auzépy, 2016, 100-101)

Ἐν τούτοις οὖν ἐξουσιαστικῶς δραξάμενος τῆς αἱρέσεως, πειρᾶται παρευθὺ τὴν δεσποτικὴν εἰκόνα Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν τὴν ἱδρυμένην ὕπερθεν τῶν βασιλικῶν πυλῶν, ἐν οἷσπερ διὰ τὸν χαρακτῆρα ἡ ἁγία Χαλκῆ λέγεται, κατενέγκαι καὶ πυρὶ παραδοῦναι· ὃ καὶ πεποίηκεν. Ἐν δὲ τῇ ταύτης καθαιρέσει τίμιαι γυναῖκες ζήλῳ θείῳ ῥωσθεῖσαι καὶ ῥωμαλέως εἰσπηδήσασαι, τῆς κλίμακος δραξάμεναι καὶ τὸν καθαιρέτην σπαθάριον χαμᾶζε προσρίψασαι καὶ τοῦτον διασύρασαι, τῷ θανάτῳ παρέπεμψαν· καὶ

εὐθέως εἰσδραμοῦσαι, καταλαμβάνουσι τὸν πατριαρχικὸν οἶκον, λιθοβολοῦσαι τὸν δυσσεβῆ Ἀναστάσιον καὶ λέγουσαι· «Μιαρωτάτη κεφαλὴ καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐχθρέ, τοὔνεκα τῆς ἀρχιερωσύνης ἐδράξω πρὸς καταστροφὴν τῶν ἁγίων καὶ ἱερῶν ἀναθημάτων;» Ταύτην τὴν ἧτταν μὴ φέρων, ὁ ἀνίερος φυγῇ ἐχρήσατο ἀπὸ προσώπου τῶν εὐσεβῶν γυναικῶν καὶ τῷ τυράννῳ προσφυγὼν πέπεικεν αὐτὸν τοῦ διὰ ξίφους θανατωθῆναι τὰς ἁγίας γυναῖκας ἐκείνας· ὃ δὴ καὶ γέγονε. Καὶ ὑπὲρ τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰκόνος ἀθλήσασαι, τὸ βραβεῖον παρὰ Χριστοῦ ἐκομίσαντο ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν συνευφραινόμεναι μετὰ πασῶν τῶν ἁγίων ἀθλοφόρων.

Translation

So then, having seized the heresy with his authority, he immediately attempted to bring down and deliver to fire the imperial image of Christ our God, which was set above the imperial gates, among which, due to the image, it is called the Holy Chalke, and this he did.But in this act of removal, honorable women, strengthened with divine zeal and courageously rushing in, seized the ladder and threw down the iconoclast guardsman to the ground and dragged him off, delivering him to death. Straightaway rushing in, they took over the patriarchal residence, stoning the impious Anastasios and saying: “Most defiled head and enemy of the truth, is it for this reason that you seized the high priesthood: to destroy the holy and sacred offerings?” Unable to bear this defeat, the unholy one eagered to flee from the face of the pious women and, taking refuge with the tyrant, persuaded him to have those holy women executed by the sword. And so it came to pass, indeed. And having contended for the image of Christ, they won the prize from Christ, rejoicing in the Kingdom of Heaven together with all the holy victorious ones.

Text 4 (§17)

Description of the ascetic life of Stephen after John’s death: comparison with a bee (Auzépy, 2016, 109-110).

Καὶ τὸ φιλήσυχον πεπαιδευμένος εἰς ἄκρον ἔμεινεν μηδὲν τὸ σύνολον κτώμενος τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου· μελίσσης γὰρ τρόπῳ, οἷον σίμβλῳ τινί, ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ τοῦ ὄρους ὁ θαυμαστὸς οὗτος Στέφανος ἑαυτὸν καθείρξας, τὸ ἡδὺ καὶ ἀνήροτον τῆς ἀρετῆς ἐπιμελῶς εἰργάζετο μέλι τῷ παμβασιλεῖ τῶν ὅλων τοῦτο προσφέρων Θεῷ. Καὶ οὕτω γυμνασθεὶς ἀδεῶς τὰ αἰσθητήρια, ὥστε ἕξιν γενέσθαι καὶ διακρίνειν τὸ καλὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ χείρονος, ἔμαθε μέντοι καὶ ἐργάζεσθαι τὴν ἀποστολικὴν ἐκείνην τῶν δικτύων

συρραφὴν καὶ σύμπλεξιν τῆς ἁλιευτικῆς τέχνης, οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν καλλιγραφικήν, διὰ τὸ μὴ ἐπιβαρῆσαί τινα ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων κόπων μεταδιδόναι τῷ χρείαν ἔχοντι. Πάσης δὲ γηΐνης φροντίδος ἑαυτὸν ἐλευθερώσας μίαν ἔσχε φροντίδα τὸ πῶς ἀρέσῃ τῷ Θεῷ ἐν προσευχαῖς καὶ νηστείαις, οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ πάσης ἀρετῆς ἐπιμελούμενος, ὡς γεωργός τις ἄριστος προρρίζους ἐξέτεμε τῶν παθῶν τὰς ἀκάνθας, λογισμοὺς καθαιρῶν καὶ πᾶν ὕψωμα ἐπαιρόμενον κατὰ τῆς γνώσεως τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἐκείνην τὴν προφητικὴν πληρῶν φωνὴν τὴν λέγουσαν· «Νεώσατε ἑαυτοῖς νεώματα καὶ μὴ σπείρητε ἐπ' ἀκάνθαις».

Translation

And having been trained to the utmost in peacefulness, he remained entirely unattached to the things of this world. For like a bee, as if by some symbol, this wondrous Stephen confined himself within the cave of the mountain, diligently producing the sweet and unpolluted honey of virtue, offering it to God, the King of all. And thus having trained his senses fearlessly, so that he acquired the habit and ability to discern good from evil, he also learned to perform that apostolic craft of net-mending and weaving of the fishing art. Moreover, he practiced calligraphy, not wishing to be a burden to anyone but rather to share from his own labors with those in need. Having freed himself from all earthly concerns, he had one care alone: how to be pleasing to God through prayers and fasting, yet also cultivating every virtue. Like an excellent farmer, he cut out the roots of the thorns of the passions, tearing down evil thoughts and every lofty thing that exalted itself against the knowledge of God, fulfilling that prophetic voice which says: 'Break up for yourselves new ground, and do not sow among thorns.

Text 5 (§21)

Religious considerations of Mount Auxentios (Auzépy, 2016, 115)

Τούτου οὖν τοῦ ἀνεπιλήπτου πατρὸς ἐν τούτοις ἀναστρεφομένου τοῖς προτερήμασιν, οὐκ ἦν, ὡς προλέλεκται, πόλιν αὐτὸν ὑπάρχοντα ἐπὶ τὸ εὐμέγεθες καὶ εὐσεβὲς ὄρος κρυβῆναι τεθεμελιωμένον. Διὸ καὶ περιβόητος λαμπτὴρ τοῖς πᾶσιν ἀνεδείχθη, μάλιστα τοῖς ἐν τῇ βασιλευούσῃ πόλει οἰκοῦσιν ὀρθοδόξοις καὶ εὐσεβέσιν· καὶ πολλοὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν παραβάλλοντες ἐν τῷ ὄρει ὠφελείας χάριν, ἐκ μόνης τῆς θέας τὰ εἰκότα οἰκοδομούμενοι, ὀπισθόρμητοι πάλιν ᾤχοντο οἴκαδε.

Translation

Therefore, while this blameless father lived among such virtues as have been described, he did not, as previously stated, dwell in some great and prominent city, but was hidden upon a noble and devout mountain, firmly established there. For this reason, he became a renowned beacon to all, especially to the Orthodox and devout inhabitants of the imperial city. Many came to him on the mountain for the sake of spiritual benefit, and, edified merely by the sight of him and his example, they would return home with renewed zeal.

Text 6 (§21)

Anna's conversion to monastic life (Auzépy, 2016, 116)

Τῆς δὲ γυναικὸς εἰπούσης «Καὶ τί με κελεύεις, πάτερ;», ὁ συμπαθέστατος ἐκεῖνος διὰ τό, ὡς προείρηται, τελευταίως αὐτὴν τὰ οἰκεῖα καταλιπεῖν, πρὸς τὴν ἐνεγκαμένην ὑποστρέφειν οὐκ ἐπένευσεν, ἀλλ' ἅμα τῷ θεοστηρίκτῳ Μαρίνῳ εἰς τὰ συμπαρομαρτοῦντα καὶ προσπαρακείμενα τῇ γειτνιάσει χωρία ταύτην ἐκέλευσεν οἰκείαις αὐτῆς χερσὶν διανεῖμαι τὸ χρυσίον, καὶ οὕτως αὐτὴν γυμνώσας τῆς συρφετῆς τοῦδε τοῦ βίου κόπρου δέδωκεν αὐτῇ ἅγιον σχῆμα μετονομάσας αὐτὴν Ἄνναν· καὶ γίνεται αὐτῆς ἐν κυρίῳ πατὴρ καὶ ἀνάδοχος. Καὶ παρευθὺ ἀπολύει αὐτὴν πρὸς τὸ κάτω μοναστήριον, παραθέμενος αὐτὴν τῇ ἱερᾷ καὶ ὁσίᾳ τῆς μονῆς προεστώσῃ μητρί, πάμπολλα παρακελευσάμενος τὴν τιμίαν ἐκείνην ἄνθρωπον προστατεύειν αὐτῇ τὰ πρὸς σωτηρίαν.

Translation

And when the woman said, "And what do you command me, father?", that most compassionate man, knowing, as it has been said, that she had renounced her worldly possessions entirely, did not consent to her returning to the one who had brought her there. But, along with the God-supported Marinos, he comanded her to distribute the gold with her own hands to the surrounding territories and adjacent to the district. In this way, stripping her of the filth and dung of this fleeting life, he granted her the holy habit and renamed her Anna. And thus he became her father and sponsor in the Lord. Immediately thereafter, he sent her to the lower monastery, entrusting her to the holy and venerable mother superior of that convent, charging that most honored human with great insistence to care for her in all things concerning her salvation.

Text 7 (§23).

The reign of Leo III as a violent period influenced by the Devil (Auzépy, 2016, 119)

Ἐντεῦθεν οὖν λοιπὸν ὁ τῆς πονηρίας πατὴρ καὶ τῆς κακίας εὑρετὴς διάβολος, οὐ παύων πολεμῶν ἑκάστοτε τὸν κατ' εἰκόνα Θεοῦ κτισθέντα ἄνθρωπον, θεωρήσας τῶν προφανῶς πολεμίων ῥᾳδίως περιγενομένην τοῦ κυρίου τὴν ποίμνην —ἵνα τοῖς γραφεῖσιν ἀναποδίσοιμι— ἔνδοθεν ἐξάψαι διενοήθη τοῦ πολέμου τὴν φλόγα· καὶ εὑρὼν ὄργανον τῆς οἰκείας ἄξιον ἐργασίας, ἄνδρα γοητικαῖς ἐπῳδαῖς πολλὰ τερατουργεῖν νομιζόμενον καὶ φενακίζειν τῶν ἀνθρώπων τοὺς τὰ τοιαῦτα τεθηπότας δυνάμενον, ἐκ τῆς δὲ Συριάτιδος γαίης τὸ γένος καὶ τὸ φρόνημα φέροντα, τοῦτον τὸν λεοντώνυμον θῆρα, ὡς προγέγραπται, πρῶτον ἐξάπτει κατὰ τῆς τῶν ἁγίων εἰκόνων νοερᾶς προσκυνήσεως. Τούτου δὲ καταδήλου αἱρετικοῦ δειχθέντος ὑπὸ τοῦ τῆς ἀληθείας ὑπασπιστοῦ Γερμανοῦ, ὡς καὶ προλέλεκται, οὐδὲ οὕτως ὁ κοινὸς τῶν ἀνθρώπων πολέμιος ἀπεπαύσατο, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοῦ τὸ ζῆν ἀπορρήξαντος καὶ τοῦ ἀτελευτήτου σκώληκος καὶ τοῦ αἰωνίου πυρὸς γεγονότος παρανάλωμα, ἀνέστησεν ἀντ' αὐτοῦ τὸ ἐκείνου μιαρὸν γέννημα, Κωνσταντῖνον φημί, ὡς εἴ τις εἴποι ἐκ τοῦ Ἀχὰζ τὸν Ἀχαὰβ καὶ ἐξ Ἀρχελάου τὸν πονηρότερον Ἡρῴδην, τὸ τῆς μοιχείας ἀνδράποδον καὶ τοῦ Προδρόμου φονέα.

Translation

From that point on, then, the father of wickedness and inventor of evil —the devil— never ceasing to wage war at all times against man, who was created in the image of God, and seeing that the Lord's flock had easily overcome the openly hostile, conceived to ignite the flame of war from within, so that I may turn back upon those who write. And finding a fitting instrument for his own task, a man believed to perform many marvels through magical incantations and to deceive those amazed by such things, who came from the land of Syria in both ancestry and disposition, he first unleashed this beast named "like a lion", as has already been said, against the spiritual veneration of the holy icons. And although this man was exposed as a heretic by Germanos, the shield-bearer of truth, as was also mentioned earlier, not even then did the common enemy of mankind cease. But even after that one had ended his life and become food for the unending worm and the eternal fire, he raised up in his place his foul offspring —Constantine, I mean— as if one were to say from Ahaz came Ahab, or

from Archelaus an even more wicked Herod, a slave of adultery and the murderer of the Forerunner.

Text 8 (§24).

The violence during the reign of Constantine (Auzépy, 2016, 119-120).

Οὗτος οὖν, τὸ τῆς πονηρᾶς ἐκείνης ῥίζης δένδρον πονηροτέρους καρποὺς βλαστῆσαν, δηλητήρια δὲ παντοῖα ὀλέθρια τῇ ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῇ θησαυρίσας, πορθεῖ, συστρέφει καὶ πυρπολεῖ ἅπασαν εἰκόνων ἁγίων θέαν. Ἀντανακρουσθεὶς δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστῶν τοῦ μοναδικοῦ σχήματος, κατ' αὐτῶν συγκροτεῖ τὸν πόλεμον. Σκοτίας δὲ σχῆμα τοῦτο καλέσας, ὁ τῇ ψυχῇ ἐσκοτισμένος, τοὺς ὑπ' αὐτὸ τὸ σχῆμα ἀμνημονεύτους ὠνόμασε καὶ εἰδωλολάτρας διὰ τὴν πρὸς τὰς σεπτὰς εἰκόνας προσκύνησιν. Ἅπαντα δὲ τὸν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ λαὸν ἐκκλησιάσας, ὀμόσαι πάντας πεποίηκεν — προτιθεμένων τοῦ τε ζωοποιοῦ σώματος καὶ αἵματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, τῶν τε ἀχράντων ξύλων ἐν οἷς Χριστὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν χεῖρας ἐξέτεινεν καὶ τῶν ἁγίων εὐαγγελίων δι' ὧν Χριστὸς παρακελεύεται ἡμᾶς μὴ ὀμόσαι ὅλως— ταῦτα δεδρακέναι καὶ κατὰ τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτῶν εἰπεῖν· μὴ προσκυνῆσαι εἰκόνα ἁγίαν ἀλλὰ ταύτην εἴδωλον καλεῖν, μήτε κοινωνῆσαι ἐξ ἀββᾶ ἢ τὸ σύνολον «Χαῖρε» δοῦναι αὐτῷ, ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ εὕροιεν, πρό γε πάντων ἀμνημόνευτον καὶ σκοτένδυτον τοῦτον ὀνειδίσας λιθοβολήσειεν.

Translation

This man, therefore, being the tree that sprouted from that evil root and having borne even more wicked fruits, amassed every sort of deadly poison within his soul, and proceeded to ravage, overturn, and burn all visions of holy icons. Struck back by the initiates of piety wearing the monastic habit, he waged war against them. Calling this habit a "garment of darkness", he, darkened in soul, labeled those under it as unworthy of mention and as idolaters, on account of their veneration of the sacred icons. Moreover, he assembled the entire populace under his rule and compelled all to swear an oath —placed before the life-giving Body and Blood of Christ, the immaculate wood upon which Christ stretched forth his hands for our sake, and the holy Gospels through which Christ enjoins us not to swear at all— to renounce the veneration of holy icons, to call them idols, and neither to receive communion from an abba nor to utter the customary "Hail" to him. Indeed, should they come across one such as this, he instructed them to first insult him as nameless and clad in darkness, and then to stone him.

Text 9 (§26).

Image theory and the negation of idolatry: the praise reaches the prototype (Auzépy, 2016, 122)

Θύρα δὲ ἡ εἰκὼν λέγεται ἥτις διανοίγει τὸν κατὰ Θεὸν κτισθέντα νοῦν ἡμῶν πρὸς τὴν ἔνδον τοῦ πρωτοτύπου καθομοίωσιν· ὥσπερ γὰρ πύλαι τινές, κλεῖδας καὶ σφραγῖδας ἐπιφέρουσαι, ἐκ τῶν ἔξω τὰ ἔνδον τεκμαίρονται διὰ τῆς ἀσφαλείας τῶν σφραγίδων, οὕτως καὶ ἡ εἰκονικὴ ἀνατύπωσις, ὡς σφραγῖδας τὰς περιγραφὰς ἀναδεικνῦσα καὶ τὰς ἐμφάσεις ὡς κλεῖδας, διὰ τῶν ὑλικῶν τὰ νοητὰ προσαινίττεται. Καὶ οὐ τῇ ὕλῃ λατρεύομεν προσκυνοῦντες ταύτῃ, ἄπαγε, ἀλλὰ νοερῶς διὰ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἐν τοῖς αἰτίοις προσεφιέμεθα, ὥσπερ καὶ σταυρὸν καὶ ἱερὸν ἅγιον καὶ λείψανον ἁγίου καὶ πᾶν τὸ ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ προσκυνούμενον, ἐν τούτῳ πληροῦντες τὴν βασιλικὴν ἐκείνην φωνὴν τοῦ οὐρανοφάντορος Βασιλείου ὅτιπερ «ἡ τῆς εἰκόνος τιμὴ ἐπὶ τὸ πρωτότυπον διαβαίνει».

Translation

The icon is called a "door" because it opens our mind, created according to God, towards the inner likeness of the prototype. For, as certain gates provided of locks and seals, they indicate the things within from the outside through the security of their seals, thus also the iconographic reproduction, presenting the outlines as seals and the expressions as keys, through the material conveys the intelligible. And we do not worship the material by venerating it —away!— but spiritually, through the senses, we direct our devotion to the originals, just as we do with the cross, the sacred altar, the relics of saints, and everything venerated in the Church. In this, we fulfill that royal saying of the heavenly-seeing Basil, namely: "the honor given to the image passes over to the prototype".

Text 10 (§27).

The Church (the community) is endangered by this heresy and will be destroyed (Auzépy, 2016, 123)

Ὁρῶ γὰρ ὠμῶς καὶ πικρῶς πολιορκουμένην τοῦ Κυρίου τὴν νύμφην ὑπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ καὶ μιαιφόνου καὶ φιλοπολέμου δαίμονος τοῦ τὰ συμβάντα ἐπὶ τῇ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ σαρκομόρφῳ εἰκόνι συμπράξαντος, ὃς καὶ παρ' αὐτὴν τὴν δημιουργίαν εὐθὺς τὴν ἡμετέραν κατεπολέμησε φύσιν καὶ τῆς ἐν παραδείσῳ διαίτης

ἡμῖν φθονήσας, τὸν θεῖον παραβῆναι παρεσκεύασε νόμον. Καὶ νῦν αὖθις τὸ τίμιον σῶμα τῆς ἐκκλησίας διαφθείρειν πειρᾶται καὶ στασιάζειν κατ' ἀλλήλων παρασκευάζει τὰ μέλη, καὶ πόλεμον αὐτοῖς ἄσπονδον ἤγειρε καὶ ἀκήρυκτον·

Translation

For I see the Bride of the Lord being savagely and bitterly besieged by the evil, murderous, and war-loving demon, the one who orchestrated the events that have befallen the Church of God through His icon in human form; the one who, from the very moment of creation, waged war against our nature and, out of envy for our life in paradise, led us to transgress the divine law. And now once again, he seeks to destroy the honorable body of the Church, turning its members against one another and inciting among them a relentless and undeclared war.

Text 11 (§29).

The transformation of the Church of Blachernae under iconoclastic influence (Auzépy, 2016, 126-127).

Τοῦ δὲ τυράννου τὸν σεβάσμιον ναὸν τῆς παναχράντου Θεοτόκου τὸν ἐν Βλαχέρναις κατορύξαντος, τὸν πρὶν κεκοσμημένον τοῖς διατοίχοις ὄντα ἀπό τε τῆς πρὸς ἡμᾶς τοῦ Θεοῦ συγκαταβάσεως ἕως θαυμάτων παντοίων καὶ μέχρι τῆς αὐτοῦ ἀναλήψεως καὶ τῆς τοῦ ἁγίου Πνεύματος καθόδου διὰ εἰκονικῆς ἀναζωγραφήσεως, καὶ οὕτως τὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἅπαντα μυστικὰ ἐξάρας ὀπωροφυλάκιον καὶ ὀρνεοσκοπεῖον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ἐποίησεν· δένδρα καὶ ὄρνεα παντοῖα, θηρία τε καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ ἐγκύκλια διὰ κισσοφύλλων, γεράνων τε καὶ κορωνῶν καὶ ταώνων ταύτην περιμουσώσας, ἵν' εἴπω, ἀληθῶς ἄκοσμον ἔδειξεν.

Translation

Once the tyrant had desecrated the venerable church of the all-immaculate Mother of God in Blachernai, which was once adorned throughout its walls with God's descension toward us, even various miracles and until His assumption and the descent of the Holy Spirit through all rendered through iconographic representation. Thus having removed all the mysteries of Christ, he turned the church into a barn and a bird-observatory. Adorning it, so to speak, with all sorts of trees and birds, beasts and other everyday nature among ivy leaves, cranes, crows, and peacocks, he truly rendered it thereby inappropriately.

Text 12 (§32).

Sergios' accusation against Stephen (Auzépy, 2016, 131-132).

Ὡς δὲ εἶδεν ἑαυτὸν ἀσθενοῦντα πρὸς τὸ αὐτοῦ ἐφετόν, τῆς ἱερᾶς ἐκείνης μάνδρας ἑαυτὸν χωρίσας καὶ πρὸς τὸν ἀρχιτελωνοῦντα τὸν κόλπον τῆς Νικομηδείας φορολόγον εἰσδραμών, Αὐλικάλαμον τὸ ἐπίκλην, συγγνώμονα τοῦτον λαμβάνει καὶ κοινωνὸν τῆς αὐτοῦ ἀπωλείας· καὶ τόμον συγγράψαντες ἐν ἐπιπλάστοις λοιδορίαις κατὰ τοῦ ὁσίου Στεφάνου ἐνέθηκαν οὕτως· «ὡς ὅτι, πρῶτον καὶ ἐξαίρετον, ἀναθεματίζει σου τὴν μνήμην ὡς αἱρετικοῦ, Συρογενῆ τε καὶ Βιτάλην σε ἀποκαλῶν, καὶ βόθρους κατὰ σοῦ ὀρύσσει ἐν τῷ ὄρει καθήμενος», καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ πάμπολλα αὐτὸν λοιδορήσαντες, ὧν μνησθῆναι οὐκ ἔστιν ἄξιον ἢ γραφῇ παραδοῦναι, καὶ «ὅτι», φησί, «γυναῖκά τινα πλανήσας τῶν εὐγενῶν, ταύτην ἀπέκειρε καὶ πρὸς τὸ κάτω ἔχει μοναστήριον καὶ κατὰ νύκτα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ βουνῷ ἀνέρχεται ἐμπαθοῦς καὶ ἐφαμάρτου ἕνεκα ἐπιμιξίας».

Translation

But when he saw himself weakening in pursuit of his desire, he separated himself from that sacred fold and visited the chief tax collector of the region of Nicomedia, named Aulikalamos, making him his accomplice and partner in destruction. And having composed together a document full of false accusations against the holy Stephen, they titled thus: "First and foremost, he anathematizes your memory as a heretic, calling you a Syrian-born and a Vitalian, and from the mountain where he sits, he digs pits against you". And after accusing him of many other things which are unworthy to be remembered or recorded in writing, they said: "Because", they say, "he seduced a certain woman among well-borns, shaved her hair, and put her in a monastery below, and she climbs up to him on the mountain each night for sinful and impassioned union".

Text 13 (§33).

Letter from Constantine V to Anthes regarding the monastery of Trikhinareai (Auzépy, 2016, 132-133)

Ὡς πρὸς τὰς ἡμῶν διαταγὰς εὐγνωμόνως ἐγκείμενόν σε δι' αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων πολλαχῶς πληροφορηθέντες, τοὔνεκα καὶ τὴν ἐκ προσώπου ἡμῶν ἀξίαν σοι πεπιστεύκαμεν· ἀστέρων γὰρ δίκην τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἀΰπνους διατηρεῖς πρὸς τὴν ἡμῶν ἀνάπαυσιν, καὶ εἰκότως, ὡς φίλος πιστὸς καὶ οἰκέτης εὐγνώμων. Ἐνθένδε ὡς

ἀμφοτέρωθεν ὄντα σε δεξιὸν πρὸς ἡμᾶς, κελεύομεν τάχιστα τὸ μοναστήριόν σε καταλαβεῖν, τὸ πρὸς πόδα τοῦ Αὐξεντίου βουνοῦ ἔνθα πόρναι κατοικοῦσι γυναῖκες, εὐσεβεῖν ὑποκρινόμεναι τοῦ τῶν ἀμνημονεύτων καταλόγου. Μίαν δέ τινα ἐξ αὐτῶν ὀνόματι Ἄνναν ἀφαρπάσας, διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν βερίδων ἡμῖν ἀποστείλας, τῷ τάχει τῷ φουσσάτῳ παράστησον. Ἔρρωσο.

Translation

As we have been fully assured in many ways through your actions of your grateful insertion to our directives, we have therefore entrusted to you dignitiy on our behalf. For like the stars, you keep your eyes sleepless without rest for our repose, fittingly so as a faithful friend and devoted servant. Therefore, as one doubly bound to us in duty, we command you to seize quickly the monastery at the foot of Mount Auxentios, where women dwell as prostitutes, although they claim to be pious from the catalogue of the unmentionable. Seize one of them, named Anna, and send her to us in chains, and promptly deliver her into the presence of the military camp. Farewell.

Text 14 (§35).

Constantine V interrogates the nun Anna (Auzépy, 2016, 134).

[Κωνσταντίνος] «Πέπεισμαι ὡς ἀληθῆ εἶναι τὰ περὶ σοῦ πρὸς ἡμᾶς ῥηθέντα· καὶ γὰρ οἶδα τὸ εὐάλωτον τοῦ γυναικείου φρονήματος. Λέγε δέ μοι, σύ, πῶς σε πέπεικεν οὗτος ὁ γόης τὴν τῶν γονέων καταλεῖψαι περιφάνειαν καὶ τῷ ἐσκοτισμένῳ τούτῳ σχήματι προσελθεῖν ἢ πάντως, ὡς ἠκούτισμαι, πορνεύειν μετὰ σοῦ βουλόμενος; Ὁποῖον δὲ τούτου ἄρα τὸ κάλλος τὸ σὲ ἀπατῆσαν;» (...)

[Ἄννα] «Βασιλεῦ, σώματί σοι πρόκειμαι· τιμώριζε, σφάττε, ποίει ὃ θέλεις καὶ βούλει εἰς ἐμέ, ἐξ Ἄννης γὰρ ἄλλο οὐκ ἀκούεις εἰ μὴ τὸ ἀληθές. Καὶ γὰρ οὐκ οἶδα τὸν ἄνθρωπον ὡς σὺ λέγεις, ὡς δὲ ἐγὼ ἐπίσταμαι, ἔνθεν ἐρῶ· ἅγιον αὐτὸν καὶ δίκαιον, διδάσκαλόν τε ψυχωφελῆ καὶ τῆς ἐμῆς σωτηρίας ὁδηγόν».

Translation

[Constantine] “I am convinced that what has been said about you to us is true; for I know well how vulnerable the mind of a woman can be. Tell me, then, you, how did this sorcerer persuade you to abandon the dignity of your lineage and take up this

darkened habit? Or is it, as I have heard, that he wants to commit fornication with you? What kind of beauty does he possess, then, that deceived you?" (...)

[Anna] "O King, here I stand before you with my body: take vengeance on me, slay me, do whatever you wish and will to me, for from Anna you will hear nothing but the truth. For I do not know the man in the way you suggest. But as far as I know him, I will speak: he is holy and just, a teacher beneficial to the soul and a guide to my salvation".

Text 15 (§39).

The Emperor convenes the populace at the Hippodrome and incites hatred against the monastic order (Auzépy, 2016, 139).

Ὁ δὲ τύραννος τὸν λαὸν συναθροίσας ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ τοῦ ἱπποδρομίου, πρὸς τοὺς ἀναβαθμοὺς ἔνθα ἐπιλέγεται τὰ τοῦ ῥουσίου αὐτὸς προϊσταθείς, ἐξεβόησε τάδε· «Οὐκ ἔστι μοι ζωῆς μέρος μετὰ τοῦ θεοστυγοῦς τῶν ἀμνημονεύτων ἑσμοῦ!» Τοῦ δὲ λαοῦ ὀλολύξαντος καὶ θορυβεῖν ἐπιχειροῦντος ὅτιπερ «Οὐδὲ ἴχνος αὐτῶν τοῦ σχήματος πέφανται ἐν τῇ πόλει σου, δέσποτα!», ὀργίλως αὐτὸς ἐξεβόησεν· «Οὐκέτι ὑποφέροιμι τὰς αὐτῶν ἐπιβουλάς! Πάντας γὰρ τοὺς ὑπ' ἐμὲ ὑπέσυραν καὶ τῇ σκοτίᾳ παρέδωκαν, καὶ μὴ ἀρκεσθέντες, ἰδοὺ καὶ τὸν προσφιλῆ μου τῆς ψυχῆς, Γεώργιόν φημι τὸν Συγκλητοῦν, ἐκ τοῦ μηροῦ μου ἀφαρπάσαντες ἀββᾶν πεποιήκασιν. Ὦ βία ἀπὸ τῆς τούτων ἐπιβουλῆς! Ἀλλ' οὖν ῥίψωμεν ἐπὶ Κύριον τὴν μέριμναν ἡμῶν καὶ αὐτὸς φανερώσει αὐτὸν ἐν τάχει· μόνον εὐχὴν ποιησώμεθα». Καὶ πάντες εἶπον· «Ἀληθῶς ἡ καρδία σου ἐν χειρὶ Θεοῦ, καὶ δεομένου σου πάντως εἰσακούσεται Κύριος».

Translation

Then the tyrant, having gathered the people in the theater of the Hippodrome, positioned himself towards the steps where the Reds are said to be, and cried out this: "I have no share in life with that God-hated swarm of the unmentionable!" And when the people shouted and attempted to uproar saying that "not even a trace of their habit has been seen in your city, master!", he shouted in rage: "I can no longer endure their plots! For they have drawn away all those under me and handed them over to darkness. And not content with that, behold!, even my soul's beloved, I mean George the Synkletos, being snatched from my side, they have made him an abbot. O violence that springs from their conspiracy! But let us cast our care upon the Lord, and He will soon

reveal him; only let us make a vow". And all said: "Truly your heart is in the hand of God, and the Lord will surely hear your prayer".

Text 16 (§42)

Constantine's edict against the monks of Mount Auxentios (Auzépy, 2016, 142).

Ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς μαθὼν τὴν αἰχμαλωτικὴν καὶ ἐπονείδιστον σύρσιν καὶ τὴν τοῦ μοναστηρίου παντελῆ ἐξολόθρευσιν, πρόσταγμα προτίθησι τοιόνδε ὡς «εἴ τις φωραθῇ τῷ τοῦ Αὐξεντίου βουνῷ προσπελάζων, τὴν διὰ ξίφους ὑπομένειν τιμωρίαν».

Translation

The Emperor, after learning of the mortifying and shameful capture and the complete destruction of the monastery, issued the following decree: "if anyone is discovered approaching the Mount Auxentios, they shall suffer the punishment of the sword".

Text 17 (§49)

Stephen's address to the blind man about the expected healing (Auzépy, 2016, 149).

Τί μοι, νεανία, προσιών, τὰ ὑπὲρ ἐμὲ διδόναι σοι ἐπιζητεῖς; Τί τῶν ἀρετῶν ἐν ἐμοὶ θεασάμενος, ταύτην παρ' ἐμοῦ λαβεῖν, ἄνθρωπε, τὴν θεραπείαν αἰτεῖς, ἣν μόνος ὁ κτίστης καὶ τῶν ὅλων Θεὸς ἔνθα καὶ ὅποι καὶ οἷς βούλεται διανέμει; Τί μὴ πρὸς ἐκεῖνον ἀνέδραμες; Τί τὸν κτίστην ἀφείς, πρὸς τὸ κτίσμα ἐλήλυθας; Τί τὸν δεσπότην καταλιπών, πρὸς τὸν δοῦλον κατέλαβες; Οὐκ οἶδας ὅτι κοινῇ πάντες τῆς ἐκείνου συμμαχίας ἐσμὲν ἐνδεεῖς; Οὐκ οἶδας ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς ἐγὼ ἄνθρωπός εἰμι ὡς καὶ σύ;

Translation

Why, young man, as you approach me, do you request for yourself what lies beyond me to grant? What virtue have you seen in me, that you ask to receive from myself, O man, a healing which only the Creator and God of all distributes where, whither, and to whom He wills? Why did you not turn to Him? Why, leaving the creator, have you come to the creature? Why, forsaking the Master, have you reached the servant? Do you not know that we all alike are in need of His alliance? Do you not know that I too am a man like you?

Text 18 (§68)

The Emperor loses his mind apparently and declares Stephen to be another Emperor (Auzépy, 2016, 169)

Ὁ δὲ πάλιν ἀντέκραξεν· «Οὐκ εἰμὶ βασιλεύς! Ἄλλος ὑμῶν ὁ βασιλεύς, οὗτινος τοῖς ποσὶ κυλινδούμενοι καὶ τὰ ἴχνη προσκυνοῦντες, εὐχὰς ἐξαιτεῖσθε· οὐδεὶς ὁμόψυχός μοι πρὸς τὸ ἀποκτεῖναι τοῦτον, ὅπως σχῇ μου ἄνεσιν ἡ ζωή!» Τῶν δὲ διαπορούντων καὶ ἐρωτώντων· «Καὶ τίς ἆρά γε ἄλλος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ὑπὲρ σὲ βασιλεύς, ὦ δέσποτα; Μὴ ὀργίζου καθ' ἡμῶν!», αὐτός φησιν· «Στέφανος ὁ τοῦ Αὐξεντίου, ὁ τῶν εἰδωλολατρῶν ἔξαρχος!»

Translation

But he cried out again, "I am not the king! Another is your king, at whose feet you toss and whose footprints you worship, begging for prayers. No one shares my mind in wanting to kill this man, so that my life might find relief!" Meanwhile, they were perplexed and asked, "and who, then, is another king on earth besides you, master? Do not be angry with us!", he said, "Stephen, of the Mount Auxentius, the exarch of the idolaters!"

6. Bibliography

Abbreviations

BHG = *Bibliotheca Hagiografica Graeca*

ODB = Kazhdan, A. (ed.) (2005). *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. University Press.

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