



## Summary :

The Seventh Ecumenical Council was convened by the empress Eirene in the fall of 787 in Nicaea of Bithynia, while the final session took place in Constantinople. According to the decisions of the Council, icons should be kept in churches and be given the same respect as to the other material symbols of Christianity, such as the Cross and the Gospels. The Seventh Ecumenical Council signalled the end of the first phase of Iconoclasm and was the last Ecumenical Council of the Eastern Church.

## Date

September, 24 - October, 23, 787

## Geographical Location

Nicaea, Bithynia, Constantinople (last session)

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## 1. Historical frame

Since 726 the Byzantine Empire was preoccupied with the matter of [Iconoclasm](#). Emperor [Leo III](#) was opposed to the adoration of images as being adversative to the explicit prohibition of the Old Testament to worship depictions of God and material objects.<sup>1</sup> It has been supported that the first attack on images was initiated by the Arab [caliph Yazīd](#), who destroyed images of Christian churches in his territory. The ideas of the caliph were transmitted to the bishop of Nakoleia, [Constantine](#). Earlier than 726 the emperor had met Constantine in Constantinople and had probably been influenced by his ideas. However, it is more likely that Leo was influenced at a young age by the [Monophysites](#) and the [Paulicians](#) of [Asia Minor](#), where he started his military career.

After 730 the emperor condemned the adoration of images, but did not persecute the Iconophiles. The protagonist in the ideological conflict for the images during the first period of Iconoclasm was John of Damascus, who had greater freedom of action since he lived in Muslim environment, outside the Byzantine territory. This fact rather excludes the theory that the iconoclastic ideology appeared under Arabic affect. The Iconophiles believed that images served an instructive aim like the Gospels, which taught and inspired the population.

After the decision of the Council of 754 and contrary to Leo III, his son and successor [Constantine V](#) organised a systematic persecution against the Iconophile monks and their partisans, mainly in Asia Minor. A cessation of the persecutions took place after 775, when [Leo V](#) (775-780), assumed the power and mainly after 780, when the widow of the latter, [Eirene Athenaia](#), undertook the tutelage of her under aged son, emperor [Constantine VI](#)(780-797). The main objective of the empress' internal policy was the restoration of images.

## 2. The Council

The death of the [patriarch of Constantinople](#) Paul IV in 784 offered a suitable opportunity to find a solution for the matter of Iconoclasm. Eirene chose for the patriarchal throne her secretary [Tarasios](#), who was willing to contribute in the collaboration between state and church. The presentation of the new patriarch before a great assembly of hierarchs was combined with the first percussion for a change in the policy on images. Tarasios declared that it was necessary to convene an Ecumenical council, since the prohibition of the adoration of images and the persecution of Iconophiles had been ratified by the session of 754.<sup>2</sup> Tarasios was elected patriarch during the Christmas of 784 under the recognition of Pope Hadrian I (771-795) and without great reaction on behalf of the Iconoclasts.

After systematic dogmatic – but not also political – preparation, the work of the Council began in July 786 in the church of the [Holy Apostles](#) in Constantinople. The soldiers of the [tagmata](#), however, remained faithful to the memory of Constantine V and his iconoclastic policy, and, with the incentive of their officers, invaded the church threatening with the use of violence in case the session



would continue. The patriarch with the Iconophile hierarchs were hidden in the sanctuary, but the Iconoclast bishops collaborated with the soldiers and the council was dissolved. The empress had not taken into account the reaction of the [military units in the capital](#) that had been enlisted by Constantine V. Thus in September the 786, alleging a big [expedition against the Arabs](#), she ordered the transfer of the tagmata to Asia Minor, while their place in Constantinople was taken by soldiers of the [themes](#). The empress advanced then in the demobilization of Iconoclast men in the tagmata, and in May 787, she convened again the Ecumenical council. For greater safety, Eirene transferred the council in [Nicaea](#) of [Bithynia](#), where [Constantine the Great](#) had convened the [First Ecumenical Council](#).<sup>3</sup>

From 24 September until 13 October 787 seven sessions took place in the church of [Hagia Sophia](#) in Nicaea. The participants were patriarch Tarasios, 350 bishops and metropolitans,<sup>4</sup> two representatives of the pope of Rome, representatives of the patriarchates of Alexandria and [Antioch](#), high government officials and many monks. The final session took place on October 23 in 787 in Constantinople, in the [Palace of Magnaura](#), in the presence of the emperors Constantine and Eirene, who signed its decisions.<sup>5</sup> The empress and the patriarch were in favour of a more lenient solution, namely to maintain the Iconoclast bishops in their seats, because they believed that the iconoclastic policy was propagated at some way through violence and this moment was not suitable for radical liquidation.

### 3. Dogmatic conflicts

As mentioned earlier, moderate opinions finally prevailed on the dogmatic level, but the controversy during the sessions was intense.<sup>6</sup> The decisions of the iconoclastic council of 754 were cancelled, but the most important question to answer was how correct was to portray God, Virgin Mary and the Saints. Both parties agreed that the divine nature cannot be depicted, however the Iconophiles stressed that Christ, who was simultaneously God and human, could “be depicted” because of his human form. The Iconophiles replied that the separation of the two natures of Christ, the divine and the human, led to [Nestorianism](#).<sup>7</sup> Tarasios rejected this point of view arguing that Jesus can be portrayed during His Incarnation on earth and thus there is no question of segregating his two natures. According to the last argument, the image of Christ would lead the faithful to the understanding of the Incarnation of the Divine Logos, stressing the instructive role of religious art. Another strong argument of the Iconoclasts was that images did not exist in the Church in the early period and that the adoration of natural and material objects was pagan according to the Old Testament. In order to answer to this, the Iconophiles made a careful distinction between image and prototype. “Veneration and honour” should be attributed to the image, while to the prototype is attributed adoration and truth.

The decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council on images possess an important place in the history of the Church, particularly in the field of Christology. In previous Ecumenical Councils ([431](#), [553](#) and [680/1](#)) the divine nature of Christ was particularly discussed. Their decisions led many theologians to Monophysitism, so that they believed that Christ is not depicted, even after His Incarnation. In 787, however, the apologists of images proved that in the earthly life of Christ people saw only Jesus-human and his divine nature was obvious only in his miracles. The Council of Nicaea declared that, if somebody denies the depiction of the Son, denies also His Incarnation, and therefore the Gospel and the salvation itself, symbol of which is the incarnated form of Christ. Both parties, in order to prevail, forged, adulterated and perverted many texts.

The more important outcome of the Second Council of Nicaea was probably the careful distinction between adoration and honorary veneration. The restoration of images became a symbol of Orthodoxy, but after the Iconoclastic Period, remained a dogmatic fear towards the unnecessary respect of material objects until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a new dynamic in the adoration of miraculous images emerges in Russia and the Mount Athos.

### 4. Consequences

The decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council gave an end to the first phase of Iconoclasm and Byzantium entered in a period of relative calmness, which lasted until the first decades of 9<sup>th</sup> century, when Emperor Leo V revived the iconoclastic policy of the [Isaurian dynasty](#). The final solution to the iconoclastic issue was given in 843, with the final restoration of images by the empress [Theodora](#).



At the same time, concerning ecclesiastical affairs, the incidents of 787 had a great impact in the West. The Latin translations of the Council's proceedings of Nicaea distorted the meaning of the original texts; as a result, the Council of Frankfurt (794) condemned the members of the Seventh Ecumenical Council as pagans, even though Pope Hadrian I had accepted the Byzantine doctrine on the adoration of images.

1. Πελτίκογλου, Β.Ι., "Περί της απαγορεύσεως των εικόνων εις την Παλαιάν Διαθήκην και της ερμηνείας αυτής", in *Νίκαια. Ιστορία - Θεολογία - Πολιτισμός, 325-1987* (Νίκαια 1988), pp. 104-111.
2. The speech of Tarasios is found in Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*, de Boor, C. (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883), pp. 458-460.
3. Θεοφάνης, *Χρονογραφία*, de Boor, C. (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883), pp. 462.5-23.
4. The proceedings of the Council were finally signed by 308 bishops.
5. Χριστοφιλοπούλου, Αικ., *Βυζαντινή ιστορία 2 2:1* (Θεσσαλονίκη 1993), pp. 137-138.
6. Generally on the dogmatic issues of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, see Γιακαλής, Α., "Θεολογικές θέσεις της Ζ' Οικουμενικής Συνόδου", in *Νίκαια. Ιστορία - Θεολογία - Πολιτισμός, 325-1987* (Νίκαια 1988), pp. 90-103.
7. Γιαννόπουλος, Β., *Αι χριστολογικαί αντιλήψεις των εικονομάχων* (Αθήνα 1975).

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	<b>Χριστοφιλοπούλου Α.</b> , <i>Βυζαντινή Ιστορία 2:1</i> , Θεσσαλονίκη 1993
	<b>Treadgold W.T.</b> , <i>The Byzantine Revival 780-842</i> , Stanford – California 1988
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	<b>Bryer, A. – Herrin, J. (eds)</b> , <i>Iconoclasm (Papers given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, March 1975)</i> , Birmingham 1977, Centre for Byzantine Studies
	<b>Πελτίκογλου Β.Ι.</b> , "Περί της απαγορεύσεως των εικόνων εις την Παλαιάν Διαθήκην και της ερμηνείας αυτής", <i>Νίκαια. Ιστορία-Θεολογία-Πολιτισμός, 325-1987</i> , Νίκαια 1988, 104-111
	<b>Γιαννόπουλος Β.</b> , <i>Αι χριστολογικαί αντιλήψεις των εικονομάχων</i> , Αθήνα 1975



	<b>Ζίας Ν.</b> , "Η εικονομαχία, η Ζ' Οικουμενική Σύνοδος και η σημασία τους για τη βυζαντινή τέχνη", <i>Νίκαια. Ιστορία-Θεολογία-Πολιτισμός, 325-1987</i> , Νίκαια 1988, 80-89
	<b>Σιώτης Μ. Α.</b> , <i>Ιστορία και θεολογία των ιερών εικόνων</i> , Αθήνα 1990
	<i>Πρακτικά Ζ' Οικουμενικής Συνόδου</i> , Mansi, J.D. (ed.), <i>Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio</i> , Florentia 1759-1798

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	Z' Οικουμενική Σύνοδος <a href="http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/nicea2.html">http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/nicea2.html</a>
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### Glossary :

	<b>caliph</b> The supreme religious and political authority of Muslims, considered successor of Muhammad (Arabic: khalifa = deputy). He was the head of the Caliphate, the religious state of the Arabs.
	<b>tagmata (pl.)</b> Military units stationed in Constantinople and its outskirts during the Middle Byzantine period. The most important tagmata were that of the Scholae, the Excubitors (these originated from respective units of the Early Byzantine period and were organized into an imperial guard and a central strike force by Constantine V), the Vigilia (established by Irene the Athenian) and the Hikanatoi (established by Nicephorus I).

### Sources

Θεοφάνης, *Χρονογραφία*, de Boor, C. (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883), pp. 461.12-462.3, 462.5-23, 462.27-463.13.

### Quotations

**The Byzantine chronicler Theophanes describes the first, unsuccessful, attempt of the empress Eirene to convene an Ecumenical Council:**

Τῷ δ' αὐτῷ ἔτει ἀποστείλαντες οἱ βασιλεῖς προσεκαλέσαντο πάντας τοὺς ὑπὸ τὴν ἐξουσίαν αὐτῶν ἐπισκόπους, καταλαβόντων καὶ τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς Ῥώμης πεμφθέντων ὑπὸ τοῦ πάπα Ἀδριανοῦ γραμμάτων τε καὶ ἀνθρώπων, ὡς προέφημεν, καὶ τοῦ Ἀντιοχείας καὶ Ἀλεξανδρείας. καὶ τῆ ζ' τοῦ Αὐγούστου μηνὸς τῆς θ' ἰνδικτιῶνος προκαθίσαντες ἐν τῷ ναῶ τῶν ἁγίων ἀποστόλων ἐν τῇ βασιλίδι πόλει ἤρξαντο τὰς ἁγίας γραφὰς ὑπαναγινώσκειν καὶ ἀντιβάλλειν πρὸς ἀλλήλους, τῶν βασιλέων ἐν τοῖς κατηχουμένοις ὁρώντων. ὁ δὲ λαὸς τῶν σχολαρίων τε καὶ ἐκκουβιτόρων καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν ταγμάτων ὑποβληθεὶς ἐκ τῶν οἰκειῶν ἀρχόντων, ἔχοντες καὶ τὴν διδασκαλίαν τοῦ πονηροῦ αὐτῶν διδασκάλου, γυμνώσαντες τὰ ξίφη ἐπὶ ἄλλοις, ἀπειλοῦντες θανατοῦν τὸν τε ἀρχιερέα καὶ τοὺς ὀρθοδόξους ἐπισκόπους τε καὶ ἡγουμένους. τῆς δὲ βασιλείας διὰ τῶν παρεστώτων αὐτῇ οἰκειακῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀναστέλλειν τούτους πειρωμένης, οὐκ ἐπέισθησαν, ἀλλ' ἢ μάλλον προσητίμασαν. ἐγερθέντος δὲ τοῦ πατριάρχου καὶ ἐν τῷ βήματι εἰσελθόντος μετὰ τῶν ὀρθοδόξων ἐπισκόπων τε καὶ μοναχῶν, οἱ τοῦ πονηροῦ φρονήματος αὐτῶν ὄντες ἐπίσκοποι ἐξήλθον πρὸς αὐτοὺς βοῶντες τό, «νεκικήκαμεν». καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ χάριτι οὐδένα ἠδίκησαν οἱ μανιῶδεις ἐκεῖνοι καὶ ἀπάνθρωποι, καὶ οὕτω διαλυθείσης τῆς συνόδου ἀπῆλθεν ἕκαστος εἰς τὰ ἴδια.

Θεοφάνης, *Χρονογραφία*, de Boor, C. (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883), pp. 461.12-462.3.

**Eirene's measures against the Iconoclast soldiers, as being narrated by Theophanes:**

Τούτῳ τῷ ἔτει ἀποστείλασα ἡ βασίλισσα Σταυράκιον τὸν πατρίκιον καὶ λογοθέτην ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ τῷ Σεπτεμβρίῳ μηνί, ἀρχὴ τῆς < /> ἰνδικτιῶνος, πρὸς τὰ περατικά θέματα ἐκείσε τῆνικαῦτα ὄντα, ἔπεισεν αὐτοὺς συνεργῆσαι αὐτῇ καὶ ἐξεῶσαι



της πόλεως τὸν δυσσεβῆ λαόν, ὃν ὁ ἀλάστωρ Κωνσταντῖνος ἐστράτευσέ τε καὶ ἐπαίδευσεν. καὶ πλασαμένη φωσατεύειν μέλλειν ἐπὶ τὰ ἀνατολικά μέρη, ὡς τῶν Ἀράβων ἐξεληθόντων, ἐξῆλθε πᾶσα ἡ βασιλικὴ ὑπουργία καὶ ἡ κόρη ἕως τῶν Μαλαγίνων. καὶ εἰσελθόντες οἱ τῶν ἕξω θεμάτων ἐκράτησαν τὴν πόλιν. ἀποστείλασα δὲ πρὸς αὐτοὺς δηλοῖ αὐτοῖς, ὅτι «πέμψατέ μοι τὰ ἄρματα ὑμῶν, χρειάν γὰρ ὑμῶν οὐκ ἔχω». οἱ δὲ ὑπὸ θεοῦ ματαιωθέντες ἔδωκαν αὐτά. τότε βαλοῦσα τὰς φαμιλίας αὐτῶν ἐν πλοίοις ἐξώρισεν αὐτοὺς τῆς πόλεως, κελεύσασα ἐν τῇ ἰδίᾳ χώρᾳ ἕκαστον ἀπελθεῖν, ἐν ἣ ἐγεννήθη. καὶ ποιήσασα στρατὸν ἴδιον καὶ ἄρχοντας πειθηνίους αὐτῇ, τῷ Μαΐῳ μηνὶ πάλιν ἀποστείλασα κατὰ παντὸς τόπου προσεκαλέσατο τοὺς ἐπισκόπους παραγενέσθαι ἐν τῇ Νικαέων πόλει τῆς Βιθυνίας πρὸς τὸ ἐκεῖ γενέσθαι τὴν σύνοδον. καὶ διὰ τοῦ καλοκαιρίου ὄλου συνήχθησαν πάντες ἐν Νικαίᾳ. τοὺς δὲ Ῥώμης καὶ ἀνατολικοὺς ἐκ προσώπου οὐκ ἦν ἀπολύσασα, ἀλλ' εἶχεν αὐτούς.

Θεοφάνης, *Χρονογραφία*, de Boor, C. (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883), p. 462.5-23.

### Description of the Seventh Ecumenical Council's proceedings in the chronographic work of Theophanes:

Τούτῳ τῷ ἔτει ἐξῆλθε Ταράσιος, ὁ ἀγιώτατος ἀρχιεπίσκοπος Κωνσταντινουπόλεως, ἐν τῇ Νικαέων πόλει καὶ ἐκροτήθη ἡ ἁγία καὶ οἰκουμενικὴ ζ' σύνοδος τῶν ἐπισκόπων· καὶ ἀπέλαβεν ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία τὸν ἀρχαῖον κόσμον αὐτῆς, οὐδὲν καινὸν δογματίσασα, ἀλλὰ τὰ τῶν ἁγίων καὶ μακαρίων πατέρων δόγματα ἀσάλευτα φυλάξασα καὶ τὴν νέαν αἵρεσιν ἀποκηρύξασα τοὺς τε τρεῖς ψευδωνύμους πατριάρχας ἀναθεματίσασα, Ἀναστάσιον, Φημί, καὶ Κωνσταντῖνον καὶ Νικήταν καὶ πάντας τοὺς ὁμόφρονας αὐτῶν. ἐγένετο δὲ ἡ πρώτη συνέλευσις καὶ καθέδρα τῶν ἐπισκόπων ἐν τῇ καθολικῇ ἁγίᾳ Σοφίᾳ τῆς Νικαίας μηνὶ Ὀκτωβρίῳ ἰα', ἰνδικτιῶνος ἰα'. καὶ τῷ Νοεμβρίῳ μηνὶ εἰσῆλθον πάντες ἐν τῇ βασιλευούσῃ πόλει καὶ προκαθίσαντες οἱ βασιλεῖς σὺν τοῖς ἐπισκόποις ἐν τῇ Μαγναύρᾳ, ὑπανεγνώσθη ὁ τόμος, καὶ ὑπέγραψεν ὁ τε βασιλεὺς καὶ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ κυρῶσαντες τὴν εὐσέβειαν καὶ τὰ τῶν ἁγίων πατέρων ἀρχαῖα δόγματα, καὶ φιλοτιμησάμενοι τοὺς ἱερεῖς ἀπέλυσαν. καὶ εἰρήνευσεν ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκλησία, εἰ καὶ ὁ ἐχθρὸς τὰ ἑαυτοῦ ζιζάνια ἐν τοῖς ἰδίοις ἐργάταις σπείρειν οὐ παύεται· ἀλλ' ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκλησία πάντοτε πολεμουμένη νικᾷ.

Θεοφάνης, *Χρονογραφία*, de Boor, C. (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883), pp. 462.27-463.13.

### Chronological Table

**784:** Ο Ταράσιος αντικαθιστά τον Παύλο στον πατριαρχικό θρόνο.

**Ιούλιος 786:** Αποτυχημένη απόπειρα της αυτοκράτειρας Ειρήνης να συγκαλέσει οικουμενική σύνοδο στην Κωνσταντινούπολη για την αποκατάσταση της λατρείας των εικόνων.

**Σεπτέμβριος 786:** Η Ειρήνη αποστρατεύει τους εικονομάχους στρατιώτες της φρουράς της Κωνσταντινούπολης

**Μάιος 787:** Συγκαλείται εκ νέου οικουμενική σύνοδος, αυτή τη φορά στη Νίκαια της Βιθυνίας

**24 Σεπτεμβρίου-13 Οκτωβρίου 787:** Εργασίες της Ζ' Οικουμενικής Συνόδου στο ναό της Αγίας Σοφίας στη Νίκαια

**23 Οκτωβρίου 787:** Καταληκτήρια συνεδρία της Ζ' Οικουμενικής Συνόδου στην Κωνσταντινούπολη. Η λατρεία των εικόνων αποκαθίσταται. Τέλος της πρώτης φάσης της Εικονομαχίας