

Is Irene of Athens a Saint?

By Christos Nikolopoulos*

In order to investigate the question of whether Irene of Athens is a saint or not, we should first briefly refer to some important events of her imperial life. This is not only because the reader needs to remember some basic facts about her reign and way of governance, but also because these may have played a role in her characterization in terms that refer to sainthood¹.

On September 8, 780, Empress Irene of Athens succeeded her husband Leo IV (775-780) to the throne. From the moment she took over as guardian of her minor son and, in reality, as the main holder of power, Irene she was constantly trying to place people of her trust in key positions. The filling of the patriarchal throne by a political and not an ecclesiastical dignitary, the protoasekretis Tarasios, was most likely Irene's idea². Certainly, Tarasios's appointment as protoasekretis, a special and important office within the palace, would have been the choice of the empress. The proposal made by the former patriarch Paul, recommending Tarasios as the new patriarch, Irene's visit together with other iconoclastic officials to Paul to advise them to renounce their iconoclastic ideas, and Tarasios's initial refusal to accept such an important position unless an Ecumenical Council was convened, all of the above seems to have been part of a careful plan by Irene to gradually

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1. For more information about the evaluation of the "terms" proclaiming a person as a saint see Chr. Nikolopoulos, *Η Διακήρυξη αγίων στη σύγχρονη εκκλησιαστική πράξη*, Athens 2018, pp. 10-17.

2. Aikaterini Christophilopolou agrees with this view Aik. Christophilopolou, *Βυζαντινή Ιστορία*, vol. B.2: 867-1081, Vani Publications, Thessaloniki²1997, p. 137 (hereafter: Christophilopolou, *Ιστορία*).

and without reaction restore the worship of icons. The supposedly joint decision for electing a new patriarch was intended to avoid future disputes³. Since the former patriarch and the archontes [the nobles] wished to have Tarasios as patriarch, Irene had no choice but to agree. Furthermore, the precondition set by Tarasios may have provided the empress with a reasonable excuse to convene an Ecumenical Council⁴. Since both the former and the current patriarch wanted to convene an Ecumenical Council to resolve the issue of iconoclasm, Irene had no other choice but to accept the wish of the highest ecclesiastical officials. Iconoclastic ideas have been so widespread in the empire, especially among its military and political leadership, that the restoration of icon veneration required gradual and careful steps. This became immediately apparent when the council, which had initially been convened in Constantinople, was immediately dispersed by iconoclastic troops⁵.

The council was finally convened in Nicaea, Bithynia. The first session took place on October 11, 787⁶. Approximately 350 bishops or their representatives, members of clergy, abbots, and monks participated in the council, but without having the right to vote. Patriarch Tarasios presided over the council⁷; Irene of Athens and Constantine VI, did not participate in the discussions at all, except for the last session. Perhaps they wanted to avoid exacerbating tensions, as it had happened the previous year at the council that was initially convened in Constantinople⁸. During the sessions, the writings of the iconoclasts were condemned, Patriarchs

3. Jo. Karayannopoulos, *Ιστορία Βυζαντινοῦ Κράτους*, vol. B', *Ιστορία μέσης βυζαντινῆς περιόδου* (565-1081), Vanias Publications, Thessaloniki 1995, p. 167 (hereafter: Karayannopoulos, *Ιστορία*).

4. Karayannopoulos, *Ιστορία*, p. 168.

5. Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*, C. de Boor (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia*, B.G. Teubneri, Lipsiae 1883 (repr. Hildesheim 1963), pp. 461₁₉-462₃ (hereafter: Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*).

6. «Βίος τῆς ὁσίας ἐν βασιλεῦσιν Εἰρήνης τῆς Ἀθηναίας», F. Halkin, «Deux impératrices de Byzance. 1. La Vie de l'impératrice Sainte Irène et le second concile de Nicée en 787», *AB* 106 (1988), pp. 5-27, here p. 15 (hereafter: Βίος Εἰρήνης). The Βίος Εἰρήνης takes its information from Theophanes's *Chronography*; it was written much later, in the 12th century.

7. Vl. Pheidias, *Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ Ἱστορία*, vol. A', Athens 1997, p. 790.

8. V. Koukousas, *Πτυχές τῆς βυζαντινῆς καὶ ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ἱστορίας*, Ostrakon Publications, Thessaloniki 2014, pp. 107-108.

Anastasios, Constantine, and Niketas, as well as several iconoclastic bishops, were anathematized, while John of Damascus and George of Cyprus were called “preachers of the truth”⁹. The Ὅρος of the synod determined that: «ἡ γὰρ τῆς εἰκόνοσ τιμὴ ἐπὶ τὸ πρωτότυπον διαβαίνει καὶ ὁ προσκυνῶν τὴν εἰκόνα, προσκυνεῖ ἐν αὐτῇ τοῦ ἐγγραφομένου τὴν ὑπόστασιν»¹⁰. The emperors were loudly acclaimed by those present as: «εἰρηνοποιῶν βασιλέων πολλὰ τὰ ἔτη, νέω Κωνσταντίνω καὶ νέᾳ Ἑλένῃ αἰωνία ἡ μνήμη»¹¹. The bishops called the emperor the new Constantine and the empress the new Helena, because they supported and renovated, like their predecessors, the Church’s faith and fought against heresies. Pope Adrian I (700-795) had already called them the new Constantine and the new Helena¹².

The laudatory acclaims to the emperors were modest in comparison to those of previous emperors. Theodosius II had been called high priest at the Resident Synod of Constantinople in 448, while Marcian was subsequently called a priest at the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451). God had entrusted the responsibility for the management of earthly matters, and therefore also the ecclesiastical ones, to the respective emperor, parts of which were earthly¹³, since, as Pope Gregory II of Rome (715-731) pointed out to Emperor Leo III (717-741), «οὐκ εἰσι τὰ δόγματα τῶν βασιλέων, ἀλλὰ τῶν ἀρχιερέων, ὅτι ἡμεῖς νοῦν Χριστοῦ ἔχομεν»¹⁴.

9. Karayannopoulos, *Ἱστορία*, p. 170.

10. J. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, vol. 1’-53’, H. Weiter (ed.), Paris et Lipsiae 1901-1927, here vol. 13, p. 377E (hereafter: Mansi). See also «Τοῦ ὁσίου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Νικήτα πατρικίου τοῦ ὁμολογητοῦ», Denise Papachryssanthou, «Un Confesseur du second iconoclasme: la vie du Patrice Nicéas (†836)», *TM* 3 (1968), pp. 309-351, here p. 341, & 20.

11. Mansi 13, 416E.

12. Mansi 12, 1058A.

13. P. Christou, «Ὁ βασιλεὺς καὶ ὁ ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸ Βυζάντιον», *Κληρονομία/Klērōnomia* 3, 1 (1971), pp. 1-22, here p. 12. Rallis and Potlis, (G. Rallis – M. Potlis, *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων*, vol. 1-5, Athens 1855, here vol. 5, p. 429) argue that, according to Demetrios Chomatinos (13th century), the emperor was the supreme administrative head of the Church and could perform all the non-sacred duties of the bishops. The emperor had a priestly character because he was crowned and anointed by the patriarch. W. Friend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement. Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries*, Cambridge University Press, London 1972, p. 51.

14. J. Gouillard, «Aux origines de l’iconoclasme: le témoignage de Grégoire II», *TM* 3

At the Seventh Ecumenical Council, it was the kingdom and not the priesthood that had erred, since a series of emperors such as Leo III, Constantine V, and Leo IV had endorsed Iconoclasm and become heretics. During the iconoclastic period, the priesthood had risen to the occasion and produced a multitude of martyrs in defending the honor of icons. For this reason, the bishops participating in the Second Ecumenical Council of Nicaea did not consider it appropriate to praise Constantine as a priest or high priest and to reiterate the theory of authority according to the order of Melchizedek. The same reasons would apply to Irene of Athens. Pope Leo I (440-461) did not hesitate to attribute priestly status to Pulcheria in the 5th century: “*ut omnibus excellentiam ipsorum non solum regii culminis, sed etiam sacerdotalis esse appareat sancitatis*”¹⁵. Therefore, in the 8th century, the Church did not demand from the emperors to defend the priesthood, as it had done with Marcian and Pulcheria in the 5th century, because it was threatened by the heresies that had arisen.

Irene of Athens’s ecclesiastical legacy, both architectural and philanthropic, is very rich¹⁶. The empress found the relics of Saint Euphemia and placed them back in her church, which she rebuilt from scratch due to the destruction it had suffered under Constantine V, the “Dung-Named”¹⁷. She additionally built the church of Saint Anastasios¹⁸ and rebuilt the church of the Spring of the Virgin Mary, which had been destroyed by an earthquake¹⁹. We should also note that she built the

(1968), pp. 243-307, p. 301₃₁₇₋₃₁₈.

15. Mansi 6, 235B.

16. See also, T. Papamastorakis, «Δωρεές γυναικῶν ἀπὸ τὸν 8ο στὸν 12ο αἰῶνα», in: Maria Panagiotidi-Kesisoglou (ed.), *Ἡ γυναῖκα στὸ Βυζάντιο. Λατρεία καὶ Τέχνη, εἰδικὸ θέμα τοῦ 26ου Συμποσίου Βυζαντινῆς καὶ Μεταβυζαντινῆς Ἀρχαιολογίας καὶ Τέχνης, Ἀθήνα, 12-14 Μαΐου 2006*, Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation Publications, Athens 2012, pp. 231-241, here pp. 231-232.

17. *Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, Th. Preger (ed.), *Scriptores Originum Constantinopolitanarum*, vol. 2, Lipsiae 1901, p. 217₂₋₈ (hereafter: *Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*). George Kedrenos, *Σύνοψις ἱστοριῶν*, I. Bekker (ed.), *Georgius Cedrenus Ioannis Scylitzae opera*, [CSHB], vol. 2, Bonn 1838, pp. 20₂₂-21₃ (hereafter: George Kedrenos, *Σύνοψις ἱστοριῶν*).

18. *Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, p. 219₁₋₂.

19. *Op.cit.*, p. 260₄₋₆.

church of Saint Eustathios²⁰, while in the new church he rebuilt in honor of Saint Luke, she gave orders «ὅπως δωρεὰν θάπτωνται οἱ πένητες»²¹. Irene placed the new mosaic icon of Christ on the Chalke Gate²². The iconophile empress also appears to have built two monasteries: the monastery of Euphrosyne (τὰ Λιβάρια μικρὰ καὶ πενιχρὰ)²³ and the monastery of the Virgin Mary on the island of Prinkipos²⁴.

Her charitable work included building cemeteries, or graves for the poor, dining halls and care facilities for the elderly, and hospitals²⁵.

Irene of Athens's ecclesiastical, architectural, and charitable work is somewhat richer than that of Emperor Maurice (582-602), but much poorer than that of Justinian I (527-565) and Pulcheria.

However, Irene received the greatest thanks when she reduced the taxes²⁶. In 801, the empress reduced customs duties at the customs offices of Abydos and Hieron, and exempted the residents of Vasileia from municipal tax²⁷. In addition, she abolished the hearth tax on the paroikoi, i.e. the people who belonged to the estates of charitable institutions, orphanages, hostels, nursing homes, churches, and royal monasteries²⁸. There is a noteworthy letter sent to Irene by Saint Theodore of Stoudios. The whole letter to her is nothing else but a gesture of praise and thanksgivings, not for the restoration of icons, as one might expect,

20. *Op.cit.*, p. 265₅₋₆.

21. *Op.cit.*, p. 246₅₋₆.

22. *Op.cit.*, p. 219₁₆₋₁₇.

23. *Op.cit.*, p. 243₁₃₋₁₅.

24. Βίος Ειρήνης, p. 27. For the monasteries of Prinkipos see R. Janin, *Les églises et les monastères des grands centres byzantins: (Bithynie, Hellespont, Latros, Galésios, Trébizonde, Athènes, Thessalonique)*, Institut français d'études byzantines, Paris 1975, pp. 68-70.

25. Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως, p. 246₆₋₁₂. Ἐπιτάφιος εἰς τὸν ὄσιον πατέρα ἡμῶν καὶ ὁμολογητὴν Νικήτα συγγραφεὶς ὑπὸ Θεοστηρίκου μαθητοῦ αὐτοῦ μακαριωτάτου, AASS Aprilis, v. 1, Bruxelles 1968, p. XXII-XXXIII, here p. XXVIII: «ἐποίησεν δὲ καὶ ἄλλα πλεῖστα κατορθώματα, λέγω δὴ γηροκομία, πτωχοτροφία, ξενοδοχεῖα» (hereafter: Ἐπιτάφιος Νικήτα).

26. Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*, p. 475₁₇₋₁₈.

27. *Op.cit.*, p. 475₁₅₋₁₇. Βίος Ειρήνης, p. 22.

28. Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*, pp. 486₂₉-487; Christophilopoulou, *Ιστορία*, vol. Β' 2, p. 150; D. Constantelos, *Βυζαντινὴ φιланθρωπία καὶ κοινωνικὴ πρόνοια*, transl. Syllogos Koinoniki Prospatheia, Athens 1983 (= D. Constantelos, *Byzantine philanthropy and social welfare*, New Brunswick – New Jersey 1968), pp. 192-193.

but because she abolished customs duties and reduced taxes²⁹. However, all the tax reductions and abolitions took place during the period when Irene was the sole ruler, i.e. from 797 to 802 and immediately after her son was blinded. Not all of these measures can be attributed to purely philanthropic or religious motives. There must have been public outcry over her heinous crime; some measures were obviously aimed at regaining popular sympathy and the goodwill of the clergy and monks³⁰. The chronicler Constantine Manasses emphasizes that Irene, by reducing taxes, wished to «*μύσος ὅπερ δέδρακεν εἰς τὸν υἱὸν ἐκπλῦναι*»³¹.

The event that left its stain on Irene of Athens's reign was the blinding of her son Constantine VI, on her orders³². All historians and chroniclers agree that the empress was possessed by a lust for power³³. Through methodical and planned moves, she tried and ultimately succeeded in making her son hated by the people and the clergy. For this reason, no one reacted later to having his eyes gauged, a deed that had been orchestrated by his own mother³⁴.

When Irene came to power, the chronicler Theophanes used the term *παραδόξως* (*incredibly*) to indicate the unexpected, surprising, and miraculous change in the course of history. "He connects the event with the future purification of the Church from the actions of the

29. Theodore of Stoudios, *Ἐπιστολαί*, G. Fatouros (ed.), *Theodori Studitae Epistulae* [CFHB 31/1-2], Walter de Gruyter, Berolini et Novi Eboraci 1992, pp. 24₂₅-25₅₅ (hereafter: Theodore of Stoudios, *Ἐπιστολαί*).

30. Christophilopoulou, *Ἱστορία*, vol. B' 2, p. 150.

31. Constantine Manasses, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, Od. Lamsidis (ed.), *Constantini Manassis Breviarium Chronicum* [CFHB 36/1], Academiae Atheniensis, Athenis 1996, v. 4456 (hereafter: Constantine Manasses, *Σύνοψις χρονική*).

32. Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*, p. 472₁₅₋₁₈.

33. Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*, p. 469₂₄; Βίος Ειρήνης, p. 17: «*ἔχουσα δὲ καὶ τὸ φίλαρχον*»; Constantine Manasses, *Σύνοψις χρονική*, v. 4359.

34. The issue of having the eyes gauged from those convicted of treason (and, therefore, also of those who were politically marginalized during turbulent times) had been a matter of a more general understanding of criminal law and corporal punishment, especially after the Isaurian period; see Od. Lamsidis, *Ἡ ποινὴ τῆς τυφλώσεως παρὰ τοῖς Βυζαντινοῖς*, Athens 1949 and especially Sp. Troianos, *Ὁ «Ποινάλιος» τοῦ Ἐκλογαδίου: συμβολὴ εἰς τὴν ἱστορίαν τῆς ἐξελίξεως τοῦ ποινικοῦ δικαίου ἀπὸ τὸ Corpus Iuris Civilis μέχρι τῶν Βασιλικῶν*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1980, pp. 15-30.

iconoclasts”³⁵. He compares Irene with the twelve apostles, stating that just as the devil was overthrown by the illiterate fishermen, so too will the irreverence that existed under Constantine V the “Dung-Headed” was overthrown “by a widow and an orphan” («διὰ γυναικὸς χήρας καὶ παιδὸς ὀρφανοῦ») ³⁶. He considers her an equal to the apostles. From now on, God will be glorified in all things, just as it happened with the Lord’s apostles. The disrespect that has existed for so many years against him will cease to exist. He always describes her with positive attributes such as: εὐσεβής³⁷, εὐσεβεστάτη³⁸, σοφή³⁹ and θεοφιλής⁴⁰. He considers that the empress suffered as a martyr of the true faith⁴¹. It should be noted that Theophanes justifies the empress’s mistakes with the argument that the sole cause of them was her feminine nature⁴². He attributed all her negative actions exclusively to the shortcomings of her gender, which she wasn’t able to control⁴³. Her negative actions were therefore solely due to the women’s intellectual inability to comprehend important issues⁴⁴.

Other historians and chroniclers agree with Theophanes and also attribute positive expressions and characteristics to Irene. In her *Life*, she is called most pious⁴⁵. The same goes for the historians George Kedrenos⁴⁶

35. «Οἱ ἀντιλήψεις τῶν Βυζαντινῶν γιὰ τὴν ἀσκηση τῆς ἐξουσίας ἀπὸ γυναικες (780-1056)», *Σύμμεικτα/Symmeikta* 13 (1999), pp. 49-67, here p. 56 (hereafter: Nikolaou – Christou, *Γυναῖκες*).

36. Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*, p. 454₆₋₁₂.

37. *Op.cit.*, p. 464₁₀.

38. *Op.cit.*, p. 454₆.

39. *Op.cit.*, p. 477₃₂.

40. *Op.cit.*, p. 477₃₂.

41. *Op.cit.*, p. 476₂₈₋₂₉.

42. *Op.cit.*, p. 464₁₅; «αὐτὴ δὲ ὡς γυνὴ ἐξαπατηθεῖσα».

43. Nikolaou – Christou, *Γυναῖκες*, p. 58.

44. For the feminine intellectual weakness, see Heleni Saradi-Mendelovici, “A contribution to the study of the byzantine notarial formulas: the ‘infirmis sexus’ of women and the Sc. Velleianum”, *BZ* 83, 1 (1990), pp. 72-90.

45. Βίος Ειρήνης, p. 9. The *Life of Irene* faithfully copies Theophanes’s *Chronography*. In the *Συναξάριον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως* she is also called most pious; see H. Delehaye (ed.), *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae, Propylaeum ad Acta Sanctorum Novembris*, Apud Socios Bollandianos, Bruxellis 1902, vv. 115₁₅, 214₁₀ & 614₃ (hereafter: *Συναξάριον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*).

46. George Kedrenos, *Σύνοψις ἱστοριῶν*, p. 20₁₁.

and Theodore Skoutariotes⁴⁷. In *Vita Theophani*, she is described as “God-inspired”, but also as a woman of a masculine disposition⁴⁸. “In order for the women to be accepted in positions of authority, they had to abandon modesty and weakness, qualities characteristic of their gender, and behave like men”⁴⁹. The fact that many of the characteristics attributed to Irene could only be related to the male gender was at that time a widespread view – but also of many subsequent ones. This explains why she was called manly in spirit. Irene «ἡνδρίσατο κατὰ τῆς ἀσεβείας»⁵⁰. They could not possibly imagine that a woman could react in such an admirable way. In *Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, she is called pious and lover of virtue⁵¹, in the *Life of Theodore of Stoudios* she is described as most godly⁵² and Christ-loving⁵³, while in the historical works of George Kedrenos, Theodoros Skoutariotes, and in the epitaph of Niketas the Confessor, she is called Orthodox⁵⁴.

It is noteworthy that no Byzantine historian or chronicler expressed a negative opinion about Irene when she blinded her son. Of course, they all described this action as particularly abhorrent, but they avoided expressing negative opinions about the empress. They all chose to comment on the event itself and not on Irene of Athens, the moral

47. Theodore Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, K. Sathas (ed.), *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη ἢ Συλλογὴ ἀνεκδότων μνημείων τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς Ἱστορίας*, vol. 7, Venice 1894, pp. 1-556, here p. 126₂₀ (hereafter: Theodore Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις*).

48. *Βίος καὶ ἐγκώμιον συμπλεκόμενον τοῦ ὁσίου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Θεοφάνους τοῦ καὶ Ἰσαακίου*, I. Classeni (ed.), *S.P.N. Theophanis qui et Isaacius, vita atque laudation*, [CSHB], v. 1, Bonn 1839, pp. XIII-LIV, here p. XXIII.

49. Nikolaou – Christou, *Γυναῖκες*, p. 57.

50. *Ἐπιτάφιος Νικήτα*, p. XXVIII.

51. *Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, p. 245₈; «πάνυ γὰρ εὐσεβῆς καὶ φιλάρετος». In Theodore Skoutariotes (*Σύνοψις*, p. 127₂) she is only called pious – as it is also the case in *Συναξάριον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως* (στ. 310₁₇).

52. *Βίος καὶ πολιτεία τοῦ ὁσίου πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ ὁμολογητοῦ Θεοδώρου ἡγουμένου μονῆς τῶν Στουδίου συγγραφεὶς παρὰ Μιχαὴλ Μοναχοῦ*, PG 99, vv. 233-328, here v. 240A (hereafter: *Βίος Θεοδώρου Στουδίτου*).

53. *Op.cit.*, v. 256D.

54. *Ἐπιτάφιος Νικήτα*, p. XXVIII. George Kedrenos, *Σύνοψις ἱστοριῶν*, p. 20₁₀; Theodore Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις*, p. 127₂; In the *Συναξάριον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως* she is also called Orthodox (v. 173₂₄, 313₅₆, 597₅₃). Finally, in the same work, she is called lover of Christ (*Συναξάριον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, v. 313₅₆) and most faithful (*Συναξάριον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, v. 173₂₄).

perpetrator of it. In fact, they saw Constantine VI's blindness as divine justice for the blindness of his uncle and other relatives, which he himself had ordered to be carried out five years earlier, on the same day⁵⁵. Furthermore, Theodore of Stoudios saw the above as an act of just retribution for the adultery committed by Constantine VI.

The young emperor, under pressure from his mother, had married Maria of Amnia, daughter of a member of the Paphlagonian aristocracy. Later, he forced his wife to become a nun so that he could marry Theodote, one of Irene's ladies-in-waiting. This act was considered as adultery by the monks of the Monastery of Stoudios, since the emperor had remarried while his wife was still alive⁵⁶. This chain of events led to the so-called "Moechian Controversy".

In his letters, Theodore of Stoudios called Constantine the second Herod for his action⁵⁷. Furthermore, the writer of *The Life of Theodore the Studite* characterized the emperor as a rake, describing his blindness as divine justice for the adultery he had committed⁵⁸. God was offended by the violation of his law, «ῥήξας τὴν τοῦ μοιχεύσαντος βασιλείαν τῇ ἐκτυφλώσει»⁵⁹. We should note that Theodore of Stoudios's attitude towards Constantine VI was to be expected, since, due to the monk's strong reaction to the issue of adultery, the emperor decided to exile him. He was recalled from exile by Irene of Athens⁶⁰.

Theodore of Stoudios (759-826), a monk and later abbot of the Monastery of Studios, is the one who mainly praises Irene of Athens. As we have already mentioned, due to the abolition of certain taxes, in his letter to *Εἰρήνη βασιλίτση*, he calls her most virtuous, holy-souled, all-beautiful, a friend of Christ; she loves piety, she is insatiable in divine matters, and desires the divine like a mother. Through her actions, she serves God and gladdens His chosen angels⁶¹. In other letters, he

55. John Zonaras, *Ἐπιτομὴ ἱστοριῶν*, Th. Büttner-Wobst (ed.), *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome Historiarum*, [CSHB], vol. 3, Bonnæ 1897, p. 298₁₀₋₁₃.

56. Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*, p. 469₂₃₋₂₆.

57. Theodore of Stoudios, *Ἐπιστολαί*, p. 624₂₉₋₃₂.

58. *Βίος Θεοδώρου Στουδίτου*, v. 256C-256D.

59. Theodore of Stoudios, *Ἐπιστολαί*, p. 86₄₇₋₄₈.

60. *Συναξάριον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, v. 215₅₋₆; *Βίος Θεοδώρου Στουδίτου*, v. 256D.

61. Theodore of Stoudios, *Ἐπιστολαί*, p. 26₈₅₋₈₇.

refers to her as Irene the Great⁶² peaceful and peacemaker⁶³, without specifying the reason for her praise. Irene was honored with the wreath of orthodoxy⁶⁴.

Throughout the entire period of the Iconoclasm, the iconophiles relied mainly on the “strong fighting spirit of the monks of the Monastery of Studios and especially their leader Theodore of Stoudios, who, not only brought the teachings of St. John of Damascus back to the forefront and added his own insights, but along with a whole host of his followers, he gave to the movement its combative tone and coordinated the struggles against the iconoclasts”⁶⁵. For this reason, the Studite monks contributed immensely to the shaping of the next historical phase of both the empire and the Church. Theodore of Stoudios spent twelve years in exile and suffered many persecutions because of his combative spirit, selflessness, and strict adherence to the rules. His rejection of any idea of compromise and his rigid intransigence made him the main representative of the zealots, who sometimes came into conflict with the ecclesiastical leadership. These zealous Studite monks, together with those from the Lavra of St. Savvas, redefined the entire liturgical cycle of the so-called *Typikon of the Great Church of Christ*. From then onwards, and due to the latter, Theodore of Stoudios’s personality prevailed, exerting enormous influence. The synaxaria of the Studios Monastery – the personal creations of the zealot monk–, decisively influenced the synaxaria of the Church of Constantinople.

Thus, Constantine VI was severely criticized for his adultery, but not Irene for her son’s blindness. We believe that all historians and chroniclers ignored the negative aspects of Irene’s reign because they were speechless by her greatness. Her greatness does not lie in the tax reduction, for which she was excessively praised by Theodore of Stoudios, or the convening of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, for which it was not particularly praised by its contemporaries. Iconoclasm began with Leo III the Isaurian in the 720s. Consequently, both the empress’s

62. *Op.cit.*, p. 698⁷⁴.

63. *Op.cit.*, p. 296¹⁸⁻¹⁹.

64. Photios, *Τί ἐστὶν ἔργον ἄρχοντος*, PG 102, v. 628-696, here v. 649D-652A.

65. K. Karaisaridis (protopr.), «Ἀσματικὸ καὶ μοναχικὸ τυπικὸ καὶ ἡ στοудиτικὴ μεταρρύθμιση», *Ἐκκλησία/Ecclesia* 11 (December 2012), pp. 741-753, here p. 747.

parents and she herself were born and raised during the years of the heresy. The nobility of Irene is evident in the fact that, even though she grew up during the years of iconoclasm and had an iconoclastic father-in-law and husband, she was the first empress to promote the synodical policy of combating this deep-rooted heresy. The response of Bishop Hypatios of Nicaea to the question of whether those who supported iconoclastic views were led astray or succumbed to violence aptly characterizes the prevailing conditions of that period: «*ἡμεῖς οὔτε βίαν ὑπεμείναμεν, οὐδὲ παρεσύρθημεν, ἀλλ' ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ αἰρέσει ἡμῶν γεννηθέντες ἀνετράφημεν καὶ ἠύξήθημεν*»⁶⁶ – Irene was the exception of that rule.

Irene died in Lesbos on August 9, 802⁶⁷, after being the sole ruler for five years and two months⁶⁸. Her body was transferred to the monastery she had built on the island of Prinkipos⁶⁹. At some unknown point in time, her remains must have been transferred to Constantinople, since she is mentioned in the memorial of Justinian in the Church of the Holy Apostles⁷⁰. Most likely, her remains were transferred there by the next iconophile empress, Theodora⁷¹.

The *Συναξάριον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως* commemorates Empress Irene of Athens on August 7: «*τῇ αὐτῇ ἡμέρᾳ μνήμη τῶν ἐν εὐσεβεῖ τῇ μνήμῃ γενομένων βασιλισσῶν Πουλχερίας καὶ Εἰρήνης. Τελεῖται δὲ ἡ αὐτῶν σύναξις ἐν τοῖς ἀγίοις Ἀποστόλοις*»⁷². Irene's memory

66. Mansi 12, 1031.

67. Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*, p. 480₆.

68. Ph. Grierson, "The tombs and obits of the byzantine emperors (337-1042); with an additional note by Cyril Mango and Ihor Ševčenko", *DOP* 16 (1962), pp. 1-63, here p. 55.

69. George Kedrenos, *Σύνοψις ἱστοριῶν*, p. 31₁₀₋₁₁; «*Βίος τῆς ὁσίας ἐν βασιλεῦσιν Εἰρήνης τῆς Ἀθηναίας*», W. Treadgold, "The unpublished saint's life of the empress Irene", *BF* 8 (1982), pp. 237-251, here p. 248.

70. Constantine VII, Porphyrogenetos, *Ἐκθεσις περὶ τῆς βασιλείου τάξεως*, J. Reiske, (ed.), *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris De cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae*, [CSHB], vol. 1', Bonn 1829, p. 645₁₆₋₁₇. See also, A. Kaldellis – St. Efthymiadis, *The prosopography of byzantine Lesbos 284-1355 A.D. A contribution to the social history of the byzantine province*, OAW, Wien 2010, p. 76.

71. Judith Herrin, *Γυναῖκες στὴν Πορφύρα*, transl. A. Emmanouil, Okeanida Publications, Athens 2002 (=Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple*, London 2001), pp. 427-429.

72. *Συναξάριον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, v. 871₂₉-872₃. In *Codex Parisiensis Suppl.*

is thus placed alongside that of Pulcheria, another remarkable empress who fought against heresies. It should be noted here that the inclusion of a person in the calendar does not imply it is simultaneously included in the circle of celebrated saints⁷³. Furthermore, commemoration had often meant a memorial service associated with death and, more particularly, the burial of the emperor in a specific customary place – in most of the cases, the temple of the Holy Apostles⁷⁴. It was therefore a memorial service held in honor of Irene at a monastery, possibly that of Prinkipos. Theophanes gives the date of the empress's death as August 9. The entry on August 7 may be due to a copying error (*lapsus calami*) or because her body was transferred to the island of Prinkipos and buried there on August 9.

The *Μηνολόγιον Βασιλείου Β'* commemorates Irene on August 7⁷⁵. It also mentions her together with Pulcheria. The same is true of the *Synaxarion* of the 12th century of the holy Monastery of Great Lavra on Mount Athos⁷⁶. None of the two aforementioned synaxaria and the menologion refer to Irene of Athens's life and actions in detail. For this reason, it is impossible for us to judge why these three hagiographic texts mention the name of the empress.

Manuel Gedeon believes that Irene of Athens is included in the above synaxaria because of Theodore Stoudios's and Theophanes the Confessor's encomiastic words about her. "The texts we have at our disposal come mainly from monastic circles, favorably disposed towards

gr. 152 mentions that she is commemorated on the 9th of August; see *Συναξάριον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, v. 877₅₆₋₅₇: «Εἰρήνης τῆς νέας ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις Ἀποστόλοις». On August 9, it is marked alone without Pulcheria. In the *Τυπικὸ τῆς Μεγάλης Ἐκκλησίας* [J. Matéos (ed.), *Le typicon de la Grande Église*, v. I, Le cycle des douze mois, Roma 1962, p. 362₈₋₁₀] the empress is commemorated on August 7.

73. Th. Giagkou, *Κανόνες καὶ λατρεία*, Mygdonia Publications, Thessaloniki 2006, p. 95.

74. *Op.cit.*, p. 123.

75. *Μηνολόγιον Βασιλείου Β'*, PG 117, vv. 9-612, here v. 576A: «καὶ μνήμη τῶν εὐσεβῶν βασιλισσῶν Πουλχερίας καὶ Εἰρήνης». See also, *Καλενδάριον*, A. Morcellus (ed.), *Μηνολόγιον τῶν εὐαγγελίων ἑορταστικὸν sive kalendarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, v. 1, Romae 1788, p. 103; M. Gedeon, *Βυζαντινὸν ἑορτολόγιον*, Constantinople 1899, p. 41 (hereafter: Gedeon, *Βυζαντινὸν ἑορτολόγιον*).

76. Δ39, 228v.

the empress and attempt to justify her presence on the throne”⁷⁷. Gedeon believes that the establishment of the monastery on the island of Prinkipos may have contributed to this, that is, a memorial service honoring her at the inauguration of the monastery⁷⁸. Irene is the only member of any imperial Byzantine dynasty who is commemorated in the Studite calendar⁷⁹. Her great admirer, Theodore Studites, not only composed her eulogy but also included her in the calendar of his monastery. Due to the fact that the Studios Monastery was deemed as very important and famous, the names in its calendar were also included in the official Church one: «ἡ τῶν εἰκονοφίλων λοιπὸν κατὰ τῶν εἰκονομάχων ἀντίδρασις εἰσήγαγεν ἐν τῷ Ἐορτολογίῳ πολλοὺς ὀσίους ἄνδρας, ἡ δὲ μεγίστη τῶν τοῦ Στουδίου μοναχῶν ἐπὶ τοῦ πλήθους ἐπίδρασις εἰσήγαγε πάντας τοὺς στουδίτας καὶ πάντας τοὺς συναθλητὰς τοῦ Θεοδώρου καὶ τοὺς πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐπιστέλλοντας»⁸⁰. Empress Theodora, wife of Theophilos, must have helped in this, by inscribing Irene in the Synodikon of Orthodoxy⁸¹.

In the last paragraph of the *Life of Irene of Athens*, which comes from a different source than that of Theophanes’s *Chronography*, immediately after the empress’s death in Lesbos, her relics are described as “honorable and holy” («τίμιον καὶ ἅγιον»)⁸². It is the only time that her relics are referred to as holy in the sources. Neither Theodore Stoudios nor Theophanes ever mentioned her as a saint. This paragraph may have been added in the last years of iconoclasm or shortly thereafter to further praise the iconophile empress. The *Life* continues by pointing out that every year on the island of Prinkipos, at the church of the Virgin Mary, where her body was buried, a memorial service was held in her honor. There is no mention in the text about how long this gathering was

77. Nikolaou – Christou, *Γυναῖκες*, pp. 55-56.

78. Gedeon, *Βυζαντινὸν ἑορτολόγιον*, pp. 150-151.

79. *Op.cit.*, p. 221.

80. *Op.cit.*, p. 24.

81. «Τὸ συνοδικὸν ὅπερ ἀναγινώσκειται τῇ Κυριακῇ τῆς Ὁρθοδοξίας», J. Gouillard, «Le Synodikon de l’orthodoxie», *TM* 2 (1967), pp. 45-107 ἐδῶ p. 101₈₆₂₋₈₆₃: «Εἰρήνης τῆς ἐν εὐσεβεῖ τῇ μνήμῃ γενομένης ἀοιδίμου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν, τῆς διὰ τοῦ θείου καὶ ἀγγελικοῦ σχήματος μετονομασθείσης Εὐγενίας μοναχῆς αἰωνία ἡ μνήμη».

82. Βίος Εἰρήνης, p. 27.

lasting, nor when this custom began to taking place. What we know for certain, however, is that this memorial service must ceased when her body was transferred and buried in the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, perhaps by the iconophile Empress Theodora.

What began with the monk and abbot of the Studios Monastery did not continue in subsequent years. Irene of Athens's contribution to the fight against iconoclasm must have gradually diminished, especially after the 11th century, perhaps because of her decision to have her son blinded. Subsequently, we cannot find any synaxarist or hagiographer having included the iconophile empress in their texts. It is worth noting that when she is mentioned in two widely circulated hagiographic texts, such as the *Synaxarion of Constantinople* and the *Menologion of Basil II*, she is always mentioned along with another empress, Pulcheria, who also fought against heresies that had been plaguing the Church for many years. However, on a different date, Pulcheria is also commemorated without being paired with another empress. Only in the calendar of the Studios Monastery Irene is mentioned alone. One could therefore assume that the date of August 7 was included in the synaxarion for the sole purpose of remembering the empresses who helped the Church against heresies and not to praise the Athenian empress's contribution in bringing peace to the Church⁸³. To conclude, according to the perception of her contemporaries, the commemoration of the iconophile empress Irene of Athens, along with another, earlier empress (who did not die on August 7) and not exclusively on her own, undermines the value of her ecclesiastical work.

83. This is further corroborated by the manner in which Irene of Athens is commemorated by Maximos Simonopetritis (*Νέος Συναξαριστής της Ὁρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας*, vol. August, Indiktos Publications, Athens 2009-2017, p. 67).