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Iconophilia in Italy, c.680-880. A European project and its method

This paper presents a recently finished project entitled 'Iconophilia' and funded by the European Commission at the Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman, and Modern Greek Studies, University of Birmingham (2015-17). During the period *c.* 680-850 a great debate was conducted around the visualisation of the Incarnate God and the legitimacy of sacred images. Maintaining a firm Chalcedonian Christology that acknowledged the perfect dual nature of Christ, the popes favoured sacred images because they visualised the Incarnate God and were useful in liturgy, instruction, and private prayer. In this article I trace the *methodology* developed in the course of the project to unveil aspects of the period of Byzantine Iconoclasm in the West. Themes I have investigated include how theological ideas and related literary imagery in the East during the monothelete and the iconoclastic controversies were transmitted to the West and 'translated' into the Latin culture of Rome and central-southern Italy; and how the papal reaction to these theological controversies set the political tone of their interactions with Byzantium, secured their political and doctrinal independence, and consolidated the western approach to visual images. Works of art produced in central Italy in the 9th century, seen by scholars as connected to his writings, appear to have been conceived to endorse and expand on key concepts of papal *iconophilia*. While some of these images mark the beginnings of new and enduring Marian iconographies, others, more experimental, remained unique cases. The key figure was monk Autpertus who established a new theological framing of Mary and the Incarnation in the medieval West and disseminated his ideas to a wider public through his homilies. I argue that his vivid 'textual icons' of Mary and Christ, interacting with a religious culture nurtured by eastern materials – texts as well as objects and practices – generated new ways of representing the Mother of God and her Son-Bridegroom in texts, liturgy, and visual imagery.