



The Cambridge Medieval History - Book XIV: The Eastern Roman Empire from Leo III to the Macedonian Dynasty

Charles Diehl, Albert Vogt, E.W. Brooks, Frederic Macler

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THE history of the Byzantine Empire under the rule of the Isaurian dynasty is one of the periods in the prolonged evolution of the monarchy least easy of comprehension. The work of the sovereigns usually called the Iconoclast Emperors has been, in fact, recorded for us practically only by opponents or victims, and their impassioned reports have obviously no claim to be considered strictly impartial. On the other hand, the writings defending and justifying the policy of the Emperors have nearly all disappeared in the fierce reaction which followed the defeat of the Iconoclasts, and we are thus but imperfectly acquainted with the real objects which the Isaurian Emperors set before themselves. Further, the true aspect of their rule has been completely obscured and distorted by the hatred and prejudice excited against them. The nature of their religious policy has been, and still is, frequently misconceived. In truth, the controversy as to images was only a part of the great work of political, social, and economic reconstruction undertaken by Leo III and Constantine V on the emergence of the Empire from the serious dangers which it had passed through in the seventh century. It would thus be a misunderstanding of the meaning and scope of this religious strife to consider it apart from the vast aggregate of which it merely forms a portion, just as it would be a wrong estimate of the Isaurian Emperors to find in them mere sectaries and heretics. The striking testimony rendered them by their very detractors at the Council of 787 should not be forgotten by any who undertake to relate their history. While severely condemning the religious policy of a Leo III or a Constantine V, the bishops assembled at Nicaea recall "their great deeds, the victories gained over enemies, the subjugation of barbarous nations", and further, "the solicitude they showed for their subjects, the wise measures they took, the constitutions they promulgated, their civil institutions, and the improvements effected by them in the cities". "Such", the Fathers in Council add, "is the true title of the dead Emperors to fame, that which secures to them the gratitude of all their subjects"...

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