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A change of heart? Theophilos on his deathbed

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This article examines the last moments of the emperor Theophilos and how his dying moments are related in Byzantine historiography. His religious policy is central here. In fact, Theophilos' stance on images is what allows us today to categorize narratives of his final moments, based on whether he repented for his iconoclastic policy. Three groups of narratives can be distinguished; those that claim that the emperor repented, those that claim that he did not, and those that are silent on the issue. Death narratives in historical writing constitute a commonplace in Kaiserkritik, *and Theophilos' dying moments are no exception.*

Keywords: Emperor Theophilos; Greek historiography; Empress Theodora; imperial death; Iconoclasm

What moment in the life of an emperor is perceived as *final* before the advent of death itself? And once this moment has been identified, why is it important to know what emperors said or did before their soul departed? It is not the emperors themselves who provide the answers to these questions, but Byzantine historiographers.[1] Throughout the Byzantine period, historiographers would describe decisions, events, movements of the body (facial expressions, hand gestures, etc.), and words addressed to loved ones, to enemies, to the saints, to the senate and court. When these descriptions reveal how emperors reacted when they became aware that their death was imminent, then historical narrative can mutate into propaganda, especially when the agenda of the imperial court challenged the writers' religious sentiments. The narratives relating to an emperor's death may be concise or lengthy, but do not vary only in length: details in a narrative are altered depending on patrons' demands, on the sources available, or on the aim of the historiographer's work.

1 Except when emperors were themselves historians such as John Kantakouzenos.

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While death, seen as an irreversible biological event which carries the soul into the afterlife, has become a burgeoning area of interest in Byzantine studies, there are surprisingly few works that consider life as it moves towards death. The process of dying – as distinct from death itself and what follows thereafter– can increase our knowledge of how death was seen in the Middle Ages by turning to Greek-language sources often sidelined in discussions of the Western *ars moriendi*.[2] The present paper forms part of my forthcoming book *The Process of Dying in Byzantium* and differs from previous scholarship in that it concentrates on the response of the dying person before death itself and examines the implications of narratives about the death of emperors.[3] The book is a study of the actions of emperors, from the moment they became aware that their days were numbered until their final passing, as recorded in Greek historiography between the fourth and the fifteenth century. The main criterion for choosing which narratives to include was the emperors' own realization of their upcoming death, for their response was determined not only by their political or religious role but also by their character.

What did emperors do when they realized that they were close to death? Since the greatest concern of most rulers was the continuation of their dynasty,[4] their two most common acts were to appoint an heir and to ask the senate to guarantee the wellbeing of the family they would be leaving behind. The imminent death was announced to family, senate, and court in various ways, such as a speech, often including the ruler's own appraisal of their reign, with reference to the good deeds they had performed for their subjects, the state, and the empire. They would ask their audience to reward them by protecting their family and showing loyalty to their heir. In most cases, the protagonist of the narrative is the dying emperor himself, with emphasis on his actions, feelings, or thoughts in the shadow of his impending death. We are also told about the people who were with the emperor at the time of death; in most cases they play a supplementary role.

The case of Theophilos has all the above elements (naming of a successor, guarantee of family, a final speech), but differs in the way his wife Theodora is presented.[5] Depending on which account we read, Theodora either affirmed or annulled her husband's iconoclastic policy; she claimed that she was the last person to have seen the emperor before his death; and it is through her that we are told about his final deeds and words. Each historiographer or chronicler was source-dependent, and the selection

2 See e.g. G. T. Dennis, 'Death in Byzantium', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001) 1–7; V. Marinis, *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium: The fate of the soul in theology, liturgy, and art* (Cambridge 2016); G. Podskalsky, 'Death and Resurrection in Byzantine theology', *Studi sull'oriente cristiano* 6 (2002) 35–57; D. R. Reinsch, 'Der Tod des Kaisers. Beobachtungen zu literarischen Darstellungen des Sterbens byzantinischer Herrscher', *Rechtshistorisches Journal* 13 (1994) 247-70.

3 London 2025, forthcoming.

4 There are exceptional cases of rulers who did not want to name a successor at death.

5 F. Barisic noted that 'the Continuator relates the same fact in a notably different way' (than Genesios): see 'Génésios et le Continuateur de Théophane' *Byzantion* 28 (1958) 119-33 (123).

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of a 'final moment' depended on their personal evaluation of the emperor's reign. Theodora's role is sometimes promoted and sometimes downgraded according to the historian's view of Theophilos' death. It should be emphasized at the outset that the accounts of Theophilos' dying moments examined in this article are a case study and should in no way be regarded as valid for other emperors.

An account of Theophilos' death is to be found in eight separate histories dating from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries, making it one of the three most written-about deaths in Byzantine historiography. The reason behind this particular attention was Iconoclasm, a turbulent period in Byzantine history which lasted 117 years, until Theophilos' death in 842 heralded its final cessation a year later. Despite his success in many areas of political, military and economic life,[6] historians assessed Theophilos' rule almost entirely according to the measures he took in support of Iconoclasm.[7] In the eleventh century, for example, John Skylitzes wrote that Theophilos 'seemed (and was thought) to be magnificent and wonderful, but to those who revered the divine and pure icons he was very harsh and severe, striving to outdo all the tyrants who had preceded him in cruelty'.[8]

The linking of Theophilos' reign with Iconoclasm is reflected in all eight accounts of his death, though not uniformly.[9] In fact, his attitude towards images gives us the criterion according to which we can categorize these sources, based on whether he repented for his iconoclastic policy or not. Three groups of narratives can be distinguished: those that claim that he repented (just one source); those that claim that he did not (four sources); and those that are silent on this question (three sources).

Three historians make no reference to any form of repentance by Theophilos: Genesios (tenth century),[10] John Skylitzes (late eleventh century),[11] and Constantine Manasses (1145-8).[12] Genesios is the earliest writer to give an account of Theophilos' reign and shares several elements with the collection of historical texts known us 'Theophanes Continuatus';[13] both made use of the same sources.[14] Scholarship has

6 L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (c. 680-850) : a history* (Cambridge 2011) 404-11.

7 Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, 392.

8 Tr. J. Wortley, *A Synopsis of Byzantine history, 811-1057* (Cambridge 2010) 60.

9 The medical explanation of Theophilos' death (eating snow), recorded by several sources, will not be discussed here. See E. Poulakou-Rebelakou and C. Tsiamis and D. Ploumpidis, 'The first case of pagophagia: the byzantine emperor Theophilus (829-842 AD)', *Acta medico-historica Adriatica* 13.1 (2015) 95-104.

10 J. Ljubarskij, *Vizantijskije istoriki i pisateli* (St Petersburg 2012) 68-148; A. Kaldellis, *Genesios on the Reigns of the Emperors: translation and commentary* (Canberra 1998) x.

11 I. Thurn (ed.), *Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum : editio princeps* (Berlin 1973) vii-xi.

12 L. Yuretich, *The Chronicle of Constantine Manasses* (Liverpool 2018) 3-6.

13 R. J.H. Jenkins, 'The classical background of the Scriptores Post Theophanem', in *Studies on Byzantine History of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (London 1970) 13.

14 J. Ljubarskij, 'Theophanes Continuatus und Genesios. Das Problem einer gemeinsamen Quelle', *Byzantinoslavica* 48 (1987) 12-27, 71-7; M. Featherstone and J. S. Codoñer, *Chronographiae Quae Theophanis Continuati Nomine Fertur Libri I-IV* (Boston 2015) 14*; A. Karpozēlos, *Βυζαντινοί ιστορικοί*

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shown that Genesios did not consult Theophanes Continuatus' chronicle when composing his *On the Reigns*,[15] and in particular that the first part of Genesios' work, covering the years 813-67 (which include Theophilos' reign), was written before the corresponding section of Theophanes Continuatus.[16] Nevertheless, two essential similarities are found in the works of Genesios and Theophanes Continuatus (the two earliest accounts of Theophilos' reign) relating to the emperor's death. The first is the speech he delivered after he realized he did not have long to live, and the second is the execution of the patrician Theophobos. Both historians also reveal differences,[17] such as the chronological sequence of these two events,[18] resulting in each one attributing importance to different events towards the end of the emperor's life.

The three earliest accounts: Genesios, Theophanes Continuatus, Pseudo-Symeon Metaphrastes

According to Genesios, the emperor appeared in the Magnaura palace and gave a speech to the public according to custom. Genesios continues in more detail:

> Everyone was in a state of despondency, made worse by the impending death of the Emperor, who was afflicted by consumption, dysentery, and diarrhoea. Disease had caused him to waste away and he was near death. He went to the Magnaura carried upon a litter, called for a universal assembly, and delivered a pitiable oration, appropriate to the circumstances, as the following account of it demonstrates. 'Let my entire people mourn for me, let the Senate lament me, and let all my household attendants cry aloud, because although I am still in my youth and enjoy great happiness I am already about to be separated from these things, and even more so from my young wife and my son, who has not yet reached adolescence. Now, before my death, I mourn the fact that I will completely lose them, no less than the loneliness that will befall them after my departure from life. For these reasons I beg you not to forget these my last words, and also my mildness and consideration toward you. In return for all that I have done I ask you to show good will toward them, just as though you were feeling gratitude toward me and acting with a proper sense of duty. For I will never again see you, nor implore you with such words, nor entreat you with such exhortations, nor beg you with tears.'

και χρονογράφοι II (Athens 2002) 323, 348; V. Vlysidou, Génésios: l'historien insubordonné de la cour de Constantin VII Porphyrogénète, in V. N. Vlyssidou (ed.), *Byzantine Authors and Their Times* (Athens 2021) 159-77 (160).

15 Kaldellis, *Genesios*, xxii.

16 Kaldellis, *Genesios,* xii.

17 A. Markopoulos, 'Genesios: a study', in S. Kotzabassi and L. Mavromatis (eds), *Realia Byzantina* (Berlin 2009) 137-50.

18 Ljubarskij, *Vizantijskije*, 98, 110.

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> When the Emperor had said these words, everyone lamented, wailed, and cried aloud.[19]

Theophilos asked the senate and court to remember his benevolent and serene government, recalled the integrity of his government towards his subjects and asked them to accept his chosen successors.[20]

Genesios places Theophobos' execution after Theophilos' speech. But who was Theophobos? He was a patrician[21] executed for treason after the battle between the Byzantines and the Abbasid Caliphate at Anzes in 838, which the Byzantines lost. Shortly afterwards, the Persian troops led by Theophobos proclaimed him emperor, despite his own reluctance.[22] As a result Theophilos resolved to execute him. Whether Theophobos was first executed and then Theophilos delivered his speech, or vice versa, is what distinguishes Genesios' from Theophanes Continuatus' account. Genesios places the execution after the speech and is the only writer to give two separate accounts of the execution of Theophobos.[23] According to the first account, the emperor commanded that Theophobos should be murdered by a eunuch at the same time as he was dying: 'the Emperor gave instructions that at the hour of his own death one of his household eunuchs should take Theophobos at night to the quarter of Pelagios and kill him there.'[24] According to Genesios' second account:

> When the Emperor later became seriously ill, and seemed to be near death, he was consumed by the suspicion, fuelled by the groundless slander of malignant men, that after his death Theophobos and the Persians would attack his heirs and the regents. For this reason, even though he was at the very gates of death, he confined Theophobos to the dungeons of the Bucoleon, and at night ordered that he be subjected to capital punishment. The wretched Emperor thus ended his life with a fitting monument.[25]

19 A. Lesmueller-Werner and H. Thurn (eds), *Iosephi Genesii regum libri quattuor* (Berlin 1978) 3.28; Kaldellis, *Genesios*, 67-8.

20 M. Loukaki, 'Quand l'empereur byzantin nomme son successeur (vie -xiie s.): Le discours d'investiture', in B. Caseau, V. Prigent, and A. Sopracasa (eds), *Οὗ δῶρόν εἰμι τὰς γραφὰς βλέπων νόει : mélanges Jean-Claude Cheynet* [Travaux et mémoires 21/1] (Paris 2017) 333-42 (341).

21 Kaldellis, *Genesios*, 52; Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 163.

22 S. Codoñer, *The Emperor Theophilos and the East, 829-842 : court and frontier in Byzantium during the last phase of iconoclasm* (London 2016) 173-80; J. Rosser, 'Theophilus' Khurramite policy and its finale: the revolt of Theophobus' Persian troops in 838,' *Βυζαντινά* 6 (1974) 263-71. More recently, C. Zuckerman, 'Emperor Theophilos and Theophobos in three tenth-century chronicles: discovering the "common source"', *Revue des études byzantines* 75 (2017) 101-50, esp. 106-24, 135-50 and the bibliography included.

23 According to Barisic ('Génésios', 124), the presentation of different version of an event aimed at leaving it to the reader to judge the veracity of each story.

24 Kaldellis, *Genesios,* 57.

25 Kaldellis, *Genesios,* 55.

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Such is the verdict of Genesios, and the wording he uses is ἄθλον [...] ἐντάφιον [...] ἐνστησάμενος,[26] which will be partly used later by Theophanes Continuatus. The two accounts do not differ: their common denominator is the beheading of Theophobos, 'a pious man',[27] who in the past 'in a God-fearing manner had hesitated piously to initiate hostilities that would lead to the spilling of Christian blood',[28] but now was 'surrendered to the God-hating Emperor'.[29] Theophobos' execution is depicted as part of the battle between iconophilia and iconomachy, since a Christian who had denied the spilling of Christian blood in the past, now unlawfully offers his own to Theophilos. On this account, the reign of Theophilos ends with the spilling of Christian blood, showing that even at death there was no change of heart on his part.

Genesios is the earliest writer to present the speech and execution as being related to Theophilos' death; however, we need to refer to his description of events after the death of Theophilos and in particular the Council of 843, which restored the use of images. This detail is crucial, as it makes clear how the same event would be presented from a different perspective by Theophanes Continuatus (tenth century), who eventually related it to the death of the emperor. In Theophanes Continuatus, Theophilos' wife Theodora demands that the Council pardon her husband, whereas in Genesios not only did she not make the same request, but also opposed the restoration of icons, declaring that her husband could not have been mistaken: 'My husband the blessed emperor was very wise and no matter of importance escaped his attention. How are we know to ignore his commands and turn to a different mode of conduct?'[30] Theodora's support was due to the fact that Theophilos had begged her not to reinstate the holy images nor to depose Patriarch John, as he had been told would happen after his death.[31] Genesios explains that Theodora's reaction was due to her imperial status, which did not permit her to express her iconophilia immediately: she 'was forced to submit to these words, but in her mind she was very pleased and not only agreed to the proposal [of icon veneration] but actively promoted it'.[32] Overall, for Genesios (where Theodora's involvement in Theophilos' deeds before and after death is concerned) the empress was committed to her husband's iconoclastic policy, while the emperor maintained his religious views until the end. Genesios' depiction of both Theophilos and Theodora almost entirely contradicts that of Theophanes Continuatus.

Theophanes Continuatus is one of two sources to claim that Theophilos repented for his iconoclastic policy.[33] He places the execution of Theophobos before Theophilos' speech, writing:

26 Lesmueller-Werner and Thurn (eds), *Iosephi*, 42.
27 Kaldellis, *Genesios,* 57.
28 Kaldellis, *Genesios,* 57.
29 Kaldellis, *Genesios,* 57.
30 Kaldellis, *Genesios,* 73.
31 Kaldellis, *Genesios*, 66.
32 Kaldellis, *Genesios*, 73.
33 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 3-4.

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> and then one day, because he (= Theophilos) knew that he was already dying and breathing his last, he commanded in the night on his own authority that he (Theophobos) should be beheaded and that his head should be brought to him – a funeral offering, as it were, bitter and spiteful. When, therefore, it was brought in accordance with the order, he took the other's nose with his hand and said, 'Now neither are you Theophobos (God-fearing), nor I Theophilos (God-loving)'.[34]

The funeral offering of Theophobos is described by Theophanes Continuatus in similar terms as Genesios (ἐντάφιον), but it has now become bitter (πικρόν) and spiteful (λυπρόν). Theophanes Continuatus is the first to record that the emperor requested the head of the *patrikios* to be brought to him, that he touched it and even spoke to it. The scene forms a repulsive image of an emperor who had no qualms about addressing a Christian's severed head. It alludes, as Genesios does, to the unjust killing of iconophile Christians during the emperor's rule, thus encapsulating the consequences of his religious policy.

As in Genesios, Theophilos' status as an iconoclast is underlined through comparison with Theophobos on the religious level: 'Theophobos, gathering up the fear of God within him, said that it was unjust for a Christian to rejoice in the bloodshed of faithful men. [. . .] But Theophilos thought nothing of these and at first put him in a dungeon and prison in the Bucoleon, ordering that he be kept under guard.' [35] Of Theophilos, by contrast: 'Throughout his [Theophilos'] whole life he had greatly loathed those who clung to the Orthodox faith, and he brought all possible tempests upon them in every season relentlessly.'[36] The spiritual distance between the two figures is shown in the words uttered to Theophobos' head: 'Now neither are you...', in which Theophilos gives testimony of God's hostility towards him. His communication with the head of Theophobos reflects his grotesque character and lack of remorse for the victims of his policies. Moreover, Theophilos asked his wife to maintain the iconoclastic policy and the place of John the Grammarian on the patriarchal throne, after it was predicted 'that Jannes [John the Grammarian] would somehow be removed from the patriarchal throne and made clear the restoration of the venerable images.'[37] In earlier accounts of Theophilos' reign by Genesios and Theophanes Continuatus, this request is unrelated to his death, but later writers include the incident as a final commentary on his reign, in order to underline his obdurate adherence to his religious policy. Everything Theophanes Continuatus says about Theophilos suggests that there was little likelihood of him redefining his relationship with the holy images. However, this was about to change later in the same text.

34 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 195-7.
35 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 195.
36 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 199-201.
37 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 175.

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In Theophanes Continuatus, the sequence of events is reversed, for after Theophobos' execution the author tells us that the emperor gave a speech in the palace of the Magnaura:

> Now, because he had emptied the substance of his body through diarrhoea of the belly and consumption, so that his soul was no longer able to stand but sought to fly off and depart, and because he also feared for his son and his wife, Theophilos gathered everyone in the Magnaura. And at length, with difficulty relieved and propped up on a couch by his close friends, he took breath with a sigh and he said, 'Another, lamenting in such illness and distress would bewail the flower of youth and good fortune upon which envy, begrudging from the beginning, now casts a jealous eye whilst carrying me off from men. But I, O you here present, weep in foreseeing the widowhood of my wife and misfortune and orphanhood of my son, as well as the loss of attendants bred in good manners and servitors and my senate and council; and I grieve to be leaving you, who are obedient and meek, to go to I know not what life and to exchange glory, knowing not what will come to me instead. But for the while remember my speech, which you will no longer hear, even if it was sometimes harsh for the sake of propriety and expediency; and keep your goodwill, passing it on after my death to my son and wife. At all events keep in mind that even as each man shall be unto his neighbour, so shall the same befall him in future.' With such words did the emperor's speech charm and mollify all; there was no one without tears, nor would it be possible to describe the sighing and lamentation brought forth by those present.[38]

Later in the narrative, Theophanes Continuatus differs from Genesios by adding Theodora, who plays an extremely significant role in Theophilos' final moments. This is because Theophanes Continuatus places in Theodora's mouth all the information about the way in which Theophilos passed away:

> And the empress, be it in truth, or else – and we concur that this is the case – fired by affection for her husband, assured that holy gathering verily with oaths that 'Whilst I was greatly declaiming and lamenting and decking everything out in tragic phrase at the time of his departing this life, as well as describing all that would happen to us, hated as we were in this city on account of such a heresy, namely, privation of prayers, extension of curses, rebellion of the populace, repentance of his heresy came to him.'[39]

For the iconoclast Theophilos, his policy was 'harsh for the sake of propriety and expediency' but for the iconophile Theodora his policy was a synonym of heresy,

38 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 199.

39 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 219.

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arousing hatred and rebellion in the populace, a state of affairs that she wished to change.[40] Theophanes Continuatus' portrait of Theodora is of a pious woman who acknowledged her husband's heresy and therefore claimed that at the end of his life he had repented: 'And having requested these [same] and kissing them with fervent soul as I held them before him in my hands, he commended his spirit [τὸ πνεῦμα παρέδωκεν] to the angels.'[41] The vocabulary used by Theophanes Continuatus is markedly different from that of the other writers: here, the emperor dies a peaceful death, having repudiated his early beliefs. Theophanes Continuatus leaves an interval between Theophilos' speech at the Magnaura and the moment of his death. Behind closed doors, but in the presence of Theodora, who subsequently assured the senate that Theophilos had had a change of heart, he 'acknowledged' his mistake and demonstrated his repentance by venerating an icon. Theodora was the vehicle for Theophilos' repentance: her description of the relationship of his subjects with the imperial family and his offence to their religious feelings led Theophilos not only to reconsider his policy, but also sincerely to repent for it. Here, in contrast to Genesios' account, the empress' contribution was crucial in getting him to recognize iconophilia, without coming into conflict with him; for, despite the differing role she plays in each of the two texts, her support for her husband is never questioned.[42]

An account of Theophilos' last hours was communicated to the Council convened in 843 to approve the restoration of icons. Theodora succeeded in convincing the Council that Theophilos had indeed converted to iconophilia:

> Hearing her speech and holding the empress's manner in honour – for she was Christ-loving, as anyone ever –, as well as desiring the reverence of the holy images, by common vote and agreement they declared that, if this was so, Theophilos would be forgiven by God for this sin, and at the same time they gave the empress guarantee of this through written assurance.[43]

According to Theophanes Continuatus, the senate took Theodora's words into consideration, including the fact that she was Christ-loving and forgave the emperor his iconoclastic policy. As the chronicler would later write, the senate had to accept Theodora's claims. Theophilos died in 842, and a year later Theodora asked the Council not to anathematize Theophilos 'for this gross fault. For if this is not done, you shall not gain my compliance nor the worship and proclamation of the venerable

40 For Continuatus, the evaluation of Theophilos' reign is defined largely by his religious policy, see Karpozēlos, *Βυζαντινοί ιστορικοί*, II. 352 but for Theophilos the prohibition of image-veneration was part of imperial policy that had to be maintained, see J. Rosser, 'Theophilos (829–842). Popular sovereign, hated persecutor' *Byzantiaka* 3, 34, (1983) 37–56, 47; P. Karlin-Hayter, 'Icon veneration: significance of the Restoration of Orthodoxy?', in C. Sode and S. Takács (eds), *Novum Millennium: studies in Byzantine history and culture presented to Paul Speck* (Aldershot 2001) 171-84 (174).

41 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 219.

42 Domínguez, 'The iconoclast saint', 219.

43 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 219,221.

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images, nor yet the recovery of the Church.'[44] Through Theophilos' last action (the kissing of an icon), Theodora secured her husband's *post mortem* memory,[45] and signalized the end of Iconoclasm.[46] For Theodora it was important that Theophilos should have a positive image: her claim to the throne relied on it,[47] because she needed the support, not only of the iconophiles, but also of the iconoclast party, who would be unwilling to see their emperor condemned.[48]

Pseudo-Symeon is the second writer to maintain Theophilos' conversion.[49] According to his account, Theophilos demanded the beheading of Theophobos on the deterioration of his health:[50] he feared that Theophobos, admired among the Persians, would displace his son Michael after his death and usurp the throne.[51] Pseudo-Symeon presents a quite different address to the dead patrician's head: 'Now, Theophobos you rest and I am relieved.'[52] Theophilos' own death is presented in negative terms: καὶ εὐθὺς τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ κακῶς καὶ ὀδυνηρῶς ἀπέρρηξε ('and immediately he left [lit. snapped off] his spirit in evil and in pain').[53] This is the last event of Theophilos' life that Pseudo-Symeon records, since the coronation of his son (*Στέφει δὲ Θεόφιλος Μιχαὴλ*) is related earlier in the text than Theophilos' realization of his imminent death.[54] Later in the narrative, however, Pseudo-Symeon refers to Theophilos' conversion at deathbed, where he renounced his heresy by venerating the holy icons with tears in his eyes. This incident made the Council verify the emperor's true feelings about the conversion.[55]

44 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 219.

45 J. W. Torgerson, *The Chronographia of George the Synkellos and Theophanes : the ends of time in ninth-century Constantinople* (Leiden 2022) 379.

46 Boeck, 'Imagining',172.

47 Torgerson, *The Chronographia*, 380; Karlin-Hayter, 'Icon veneration', 181-2.

48 Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, 449; Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* (London 2012) 107-9. On the conversion of Theophilos in hagiography, see O. P. Domínguez, 'The iconoclast saint: Emperor Theophilos in Byzantine hagiography', in S. Tougher (ed.) *The Emperor in the Byzantine World*, (New York 2019) 216-34.

49 Karpozēlos, *Βυζαντινοί ιστορικοί* II.402-6. For Pseudo-Symeon's familiarity with the work of Genesios, ibid 403. Symeon Logothetes refers to Theophobos' imprisonment and death when Theophilos' illness appeared, but it is not time-specific when compared to the other authors discussed in this article. See S. Wahlgren (ed.), *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon*, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae (Berlin 2006) 231; S. Wahlgren (tr.), *The Chronicle of the Logothete* (Liverpool 2019) 175. George the monk refers briefly that he died of dysentery, with no further information: see C. de Boor (ed.), *Georgii Monachi Chronicon* II (Leipzig 1904) 797.

50 *βαρηθεὶς ὑπὸ τῆς νόσου προστάσσει ἀποκεφαλισθῆναι αὐτόν*, see E. Bekker (ed.) *Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus* (Bonn 1838) 646.

51 Bekker, *Theophanes continuatus* 646.

52 *ἄρτι, Θεόφοβε καὶ σὺ ἀνεπαύης καὶ ἐγὼ ἀπεφρόντισα*, see Bekker, *Theophanes continuatus* 646.

53 Ibid. On *ἀπορρήγνῡμι* or *ἀπορρηγν-ύω*, see https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsj/#eid=13957.

54 Bekker, *Theophanes Continuatus*, 645.

55 Bekker, *Theophanes Continuatus*, 651.

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Overall, Theophanes Continuatus follows Genesios in recording the emperor's speech at the Magnaura without any references to his religious policy, which Theophilos considered beneficial to the empire. Moreover, his address to Theophobos' head makes clear that repentance was not an option for him even during his last hours on earth. Therefore, Theophanes Continuatus and Pseudo-Symeon 'invent' his repentance, which they channel through Theodora's speech to the Council of 843, from which Theodora earns the credit for restoring the icons and preserving the memory of her husband, two crucial pillars to buttress her under-age son's place on the throne.

Hagiographical sources relating to Theophilos' repentance

Although Theophanes Continuatus and Pseudo-Symeon are the sole Byzantine historiographers to include an account of Theophilos' repentance, they are not the only sources in Byzantine literature to record this tradition. According to the hagiographical life of Empress Theodora, dating from the ninth or the beginning of the tenth century,[56] the emperor repented in his final hours and changed his mind about the veneration of icons:

> As he was dying, [. . .] the Augusta Theodora lamented over him. Then, she dozed off for a while and saw the supremely holy Mother of God holding in her arms the infant <Christ> with His cross and a terrifying ring of beautiful angels violently reproaching the emperor Theophilos and beating him without cessation because of the holy and venerable icons. This went on for some time. Meanwhile, the emperor Theophilos babbled, tossing his head endlessly from one side to the other and saying over and over in his- anguish, 'Woe is me, wretch that I am! Because of the icons I am being beaten, because of the icons I am being flogged.' The sound of it was a fearful and strange thing for the mourners there to witness. The emperor spent the whole night crying out and saying things like this while the empress kept vigil, dedicating her heart and mind to tearful intercession with the supremely holy Mother of God. Then Theoktistos, who served as kanikleios, hurriedly put on the enkolpion that he had been keeping hidden out of fear of the emperor.[57] [. . .] The emperor repeatedly pointed his finger at him and vigorously nodded at him, commanding < Theoktistos> to come toward him [. . .] the emperor touched the necklace with his finger and drew it to his lips. Well, when the necklace, that bore, as was said, the holy and venerable image of our Savior

56 A. Markopoulos, 'Βίος τῆς αὐτοκράτειρας Θεοδώρας (BHG 1731)', *Βυζαντινά Σύμμεικτα* 5 (1983) 249–85; M. Vinson, 'The life of St. Theodora the empress', in *Byzantine Defenders of Images: eight saints' lives in English translation*, ed. A.-M. Talbot (Washington, DC 1998) 353-60.

57 Markopoulos, 'Βίος τῆς αὐτοκράτειρας Θεοδώρας', 249–85. Section 8. Translation in Vinson, 'The life', 372-3.

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> and God, had been put to his lips and mouth, suddenly- what an unexpected miracle!- those lips of his that had gaped wide apart, the ones that had debased the teachings of the Church and babbled a lot of nonsense against the holy and venerable images, came together and were closed. [. . .] His screams fell silent as did the unbearably painful torments and punishments. Whereupon he fell asleep at once, firmly convinced that it was a very good and spiritually beneficial thing to adore and honor and venerate the holy and venerable image of the Lord our God and Savior Jesus Christ and His all-holy mother and all His saints as the first step on a journey to Godhead that ends in revelation.[58]

The description of Theophilos' repentance as a miracle performed by Christ, and most importantly of his veneration of an icon of Christ, ends the cycle of iconoclastic reigns initiated by Leo III with the hypothetical destruction of the icon of Christ in the Chalke Gate in 726.[59]

Theoktistos' inclusion is not accidental here. In the accounts of Genesios, Theophanes Continuatus, Zonaras, and Skylitzes,[60] Theoktistos and Theodora both received Theophilos' last orders not to reinstate the holy images and not to depose John the Grammarian. We cannot know the degree to which the *vita* was included in Theophanes Continuatus' history, but certainly one cannot ignore the striking similarities. In the same framework, according to the ninth-century *vita* (dated after 863)[61] of Saints David, Symeon, and George of Lesbos, Theophilos repented for 'his departure from piety and his persecution of the orthodox',[62] and Theodora demanded pardon for her husband: 'Now I also beseech you not to condemn to anathema my husband who was also your emperor, but to receive him in the spirit of concession as faithful and orthodox.'[63] In fact, while the lack of unanimous acceptance of her request, made her angry.[64] Another text, the *De Theophili imperatoris absolutione*, which also dates after the death of Theophilos,[65] and which served as a source for the life Theodora, records the repentance of Theophilos through his kissing an icon of Christ, even against his will (*ἄκοντα καὶ μὴ βουλόμενον*).[66] His reluctance to repent is

58 Vinson, 'The life', 373.

59 Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast* Era, 128-35.

60 Wortley, *Skylitzes*,74; Kaldellis, *Genesios*,66; Ioannēs Grēgoriadēs, *Ιωάννης Ζωναράς- εισαγωγή, μετάφραση, σχόλια* II (Athens 1998) 153. Manasses does not refer to the incident, while Glykas and Ephraim do not name Theoktistos.

61 D. Domingo-Forasté and D. Abrahamse, 'Life of Sts. David, Symeon, and George of Lesbos', in *Byzantine Defenders of Images*, 143–241 (147).

62 Forasté and Abrahamse, 'Life of Sts. David', 213.

63 Forasté and Abrahamse, 'Life of Sts. David', 214.

64 Forasté and Abrahamse, 'Life of Sts. David', 215.

65 Domínguez, 'The iconoclast saint', 222 (mid-ninth century).

66 W. Regel (ed.), 'Narrationes de Theophilo et Theodora', *Analecta Byzantino- Russica* (St Petersburg 1891) no. 2: 'De Theophili imperatoris absolutione' (BHG 1732), 21.

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insinuated already in the life of SS. David, Symeon and George of Lesbos: 'When the emperor was on his deathbed, he had repented, if not entirely, of his departure from piety.'[67] The life of Theodora aside, the two texts reflect the ambiguous stance of hagiography towards the repentance of Theophilos and link the narrative of Theophilos' last moments with the restoration of Orthodoxy. These two elements are amplified in the histories under discussion, but with radical divergence between them, as we will see.

Ioannis Zonaras, Michael Glykas, Ephraim of Ainos

Among writers who claimed that Theophilus never repented, we find two writers of the twelfth century, Ioannis Zonaras (*ca*. 1143-50)[68] and Michael Glykas,[69] and one of the fourteenth, the chronicler Ephraim of Ainos.[70]

Zonaras includes the account of Theophobos' beheading and says that Theophilos imprisoned him because he feared a coup after his death.[71] He also includes the emperor's address to Theophobos' head ('Now neither are you Theophobos. . .'), by repeating Theophanes Continuatus' claim that Theophilos touched the severed head, though he replaces the nose with the hair. At once, his spirit left his body:[72] Theophilos ended his life in self-awareness as an enemy of God. As to Theophilos' request to Theodora regarding images and Patriarch John, after mentioning Theophobos' execution and Theophilos' twelve years of rule, Zonaras writes that he died ceaselessly asking his wife not to restore the icons and not to depose Patriarch John the Grammarian.[73] Zonaras gives the earliest account in which Theophilos' request to Theodora not only demonstrated his commitment to iconoclasm but did so till the end. His dishonourable end is described as a 'discharging of his soul' (ἐξηρεύξατο τὴν ψυχήν), pointing to a death akin to vomiting.[74]

Michael Glykas uses Zonaras' *Epitome*, particularly regarding the events between the reigns of Theophilos and of Basil I,[75] and often repeats Zonaras' text almost verbatim, indicating that he had access to a manuscript of the *Epitome*.[76] He briefly refers to Theophobos, who is otherwise not mentioned in the narrative ('one Theophobos' (Θεόφοβός τις), as is his relationship with the emperor. He repeats

67 Forasté and Abrahamse, 'Life of Sts. David', 213.

68 T. Kampianaki, *John Zonaras' Epitome of histories: a compendium of Jewish-Roman history and its reception* (Oxford 2022) 10.

69 K. Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur von Justinian bis zum Ende des oströmischen Reiches. 527-1453* (Munich 1891) 380-3.

70 O. Lampsidis, *Εφραίμ του Αινίου χρονογραφία* I (Athens 1984) 10*.

71 Grēgoriadēs, *Ζωναράς*, 153.

72 Grēgoriadēs, *Ζωναράς*, 153.

73 Grēgoriadēs, *Ζωναράς*, 153.

74 On *ἐξερεύγομαι*, see https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsj/#eid=38283.

75 Kampianaki, *John Zonaras'* Epitome, 129.

76 Kampianaki, *Zonaras*, 130.

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Zonaras' account of the touching of Theophobos' hair and the concluding address to his head, adding that after these he discharged his soul (ἐξηρεύξατο τὴν ψυχήν). Like Zonaras, he mentions that when Theophilos was dying he did not grant the restoration of icons or order the deposition of Patriarch John.[77] For Ephraim of Ainos, who also used details found in Zonaras,[78] the life and work of Theophilos were encapsulated in the loss of Amorion on 842 and the sadness that the emperor felt as he could not free the hostages taken by the Agarenes; as a result, Theophilos died of an illness caused by long sadness, and nevertheless begged his wife to maintain the iconoclastic policy and 'leave on the throne of the Church not the shepherd but the wolf John'.[79] Ephraim uses the wording ἀπέρρηξε κακῶς τὸν βίον (he died a bad death), following other writers who suggested the sort of death befitting an iconoclast ruler. What is common to the three histories is the transfer of the narrative related to the restoration of images and the future of Patriarch John towards the end of Theophilos' life, a tradition that began with Zonaras. In contrast to Theophanes Continuatus, they demonstrate Theophilos' persistence in his policy, even at the hour of death.[80]

John Skylitzes, Constantine Manasses

Although John Skylitzes made extensive use of the first four books of Theophanes Continuatus for his Historical *Synopsis*,[81] he does not follow Theophanes Continuatus' line of events: he places the murder of Theophobos after the speech of Theophilos in the Magnavra, but without reference to words of the emperor:

> [S]everely oppressed by his illness, Theophilos had himself brought on a stretcher into the Magnaura, where he had assembled the senate and the rest of the eminent citizenry. In doleful tones he recited and lamented his woes, beseeching the assembled company graciously to honour his memory by keeping faith and dealing kindly with his wife and son, preserving the throne for them, unassailed by any conspiracy. The assembly was deeply touched by the emperor's pathetic words; groaning and wailing arose on all sides. Everybody interceded with the Deity, praying for the emperor's health and life. And if he should die (which they certainly did not wish to happen), they undertook to surrender their lives if necessary for his lady wife their empress and the children, to keep the throne secure for them. That is what they promised; shortly afterwards, completely consumed by his illness, the

77 E. Bekker (ed.), *Michael Glycas Annales* (Bonn 1836) 539.

78 Lampsidis, *Εφραίμ του Αινίου*, vol.1, 5. V.

79 'ὅθεν βασιλεὺς ἐκτακεὶς μακρᾷ λύπῃ νοσήσας ἀπέρρηξε κακῶς τὸν βίον', see Lampsidis, *Εφραίμ του Αινίου*, I.86. (Translation there.)

80 See n. 3 above.

81 Hirsch, *Byzantinische Studien*, 374; Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, *20; A. Karpozēlos, *Βυζαντινοί ιστορικοί και χρονογράφοι* III (Athens 2009) 342.

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> emperor paid the debt which all must pay, having governed the empire for twelve years and three months.[82]

The execution of Theophobos immediately follows the imperial speech:

> When Theophilos realized that his end was near, he cast [Theophobos] into the darkest of dungeons, at the Boukoleon. Then, when he was about to die, he ordered them to cut off the man's head ands bring it to him. When he received it, he seized it by the hair with his hands and uttered his last words: 'From this moment, I am no longer Theophilos and you are no longer Theophobos.'[83]

If we compare the three accounts that record Theophilos' speech (of Genesios, Theophanes Continuatus and Skylitzes), we notice that the first two are very similar. Both emotionally charged, whereas Skylitzes does not record the emperor's words but provides a summary of the event. Further differences are the promise to Theophilos by the Senate that it will adhere to the imperial request, the prayer for Theophilos' life and health, and the prevention of any possibility of conspiracy. It could be that Skylitzes here alludes to the later conspiracy of Basil I against Michael III. The language he uses for Theophilos' death certainly lacks any form of criticism, for it reflects only a general belief about the matter of death: τὸ κοινὸν ἀνεπλήρωσεν ὄφλημα (' he paid the debt which all must pay').[84]

The same nuanced approach to Theophilos' death was adopted by Constantine Manasses in the twelfth century. His approach befits the entertaining style of his chronicle.[85] Manasses makes no insinuations about the emperor's iconoclastic policy and presents his death as a change of state that applies to all humanity:

> When Theophilos was about to cross the river of transitory being, which surrounds the bulk of mortal flesh and which is impossible not to pass, for Nature, the swift ferryman, demands her due, Theophilos. . . adorned his son Michael with the crown.[86]

Manasses is the only historiographer to refer to the act of coronation and not just to the acclamation of Michael III as mentioned in or suggested by the other sources. Like Ephraim of Ainos, Manasses makes no mention of Theophobos; and unlike all other writers he focuses particularly on Theophilos' achievements. However, this is not to

82 Thurn, *Ioannis* Scylitzae, 79-80. Translation in Wortley, *Skylitzes*, 81.

83 Wortley, *Skylitzes*, 81.

84 Thurn, *Ioannis*, 80. Translation in Wortley, *Skylitzes,* 81.

85 I. Nilsson, *Writer and Occasion in Twelfth-century Byzantium : the authorial voice of Constantine Manasses* (Cambridge 2021) 18; H. Maguire, *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (Washington, DC 1997) 162.

86 Yuretich, *The Chronicle*, 195-6; O. Lampsidis, *Constantini Manassis Breviarium chronicum* I (Athens 1996) 265.

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say that for Manasses Theophilos' reign is without fault. Like Skylitzes, Manasses adopts a negative attitude to Theophilos as far as his iconoclastic policy is concerned, but notes that in other respects he was a 'shining spirit'.[87] His balanced approach to Theophilos' reign is shown in the words describing the moment he realized that death was unavoidable and so he proceeded to Michael III's coronation. The unique way to present Theophilos' death is embedded to the distinct literary style of Manasses' verse history.[88]

Conclusion

The imprint of Theophilos' death on Byzantine historiographical narrative was closely related to his iconoclastic policy, which all historians denounced. Genesios and Theophanes Continuatus, in particular, castigate the emperor – and more harshly than the rest of the historiographers mentioned – owing to the political purpose of their works: the hostile treatment of Basil I's predecessors.[89] It has been suggested that Theophanes Continuatus' Text I (i.e. Books I-IV), which includes the reign of Theophilos, was 'produced in the literary circle of Constantine VII during the latter's sole rule (944–959) with the purpose of exalting the Macedonian dynasty and its founder, Basil I, at the expense of the four emperors who preceded him'.[90] However, when it comes to Theophilos' repentance, we cannot know whether Theophanes Continuatus and Pseudo-Symeon based their accounts on the *vita* of Theodora,[91] or whether Theophanes was encouraged to do so by his patron Constantine Porphyrogennetos. What is certain is that, despite the variations between the accounts of Genesios and Theophanes Continuatus (chronological succession between Theophobos' execution and Theophilos' speech, address of Theophilos, different role of Theodora), they both strongly criticize Theophilos' religious policy.[92] Romilly Jenkins claimed that Genesios and Theophanes Continuatus presented a well-rounded

87 Yuretich, *The Chronicle*, 190.

88 Odysseus, *Constantini*, XLI-XLV and more recently E.-S. Kiapidou, 'Ο λογοτέχνης Κωνσταντίνος Μανασσής συγγράφει Σύνοψη Χρονική. Οι πηγές του για την εξιστόρηση της πρωτοβυζαντινής περιόδου', in Kotzabassi and Mavromatis, *Realia Byzantina*, 57-66.

89 Jenkins, 'The classical background'.

90 Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 14*. See also Hirsch, *Byzantinische Studien*, 224; Karpozēlos, *Vyzantinoi historikoi*, 317, and more recently, Vlysidou, 'Génésios', 159.

91 J. S. Codoñer, The Author of Theophanes Continuatus I–IV and the Historical Excerpts of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *Investigatio Fontium II. Griechische und lateinische Quellen mit Erläuterungen (Antiquitas - Byzantium - Renacentia 30)*, ed. L. Horváth and E. Juhász (Budapest 2017) 20.

92 Barisic claims that Genesios and Continuatus share the same opinion of the people and the events they describe (Barisic, 'Génésios', 124), which fits the presentation of Theodora and Theoktistos pertaining to their iconophilia. On the common features between Genesios and Continuatus in the first three books of Genesios (reigns of Leo V, Michael II and Theophilos), see Karpozēlos, *Βυζαντινοί ιστορικοί* II, 324-5; on Genesios' nuanced approach to the work of iconophile emperors (813-842) in comparison to Continuatus, 327.

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image of an emperor, a 'compound of good and evil'.[93] The death of Theophilos pertains to his evil side, his persecution of the Iconophiles. Despite Theophilos' worthiness as emperor, his religious policy was the reason that a 'form of catharsis in the State',[94] had to take place after his death. Pseudo-Symeon notes that Theophilos was 'a good administrator', 'but he had only this heresy'.[95] Theodora's struggle to maintain her husband's memory points in this direction: her husband's religious lapse could cost her son's throne, so the narrative around Theophilos had to change. Despite efforts on the part of writers at a well-rounded image of the emperor, their accounts depended on the availability of (or selectivity with) sources, the expectations of their patrons, their religious beliefs, and the overall goal of their narrative. Manasses, for example, refined his portrayal of Theophilos stems from his goal to please the audience, and his neutrality does not necessarily reflect a personal stance. He and Ephraim wrote in verse and perhaps had a different audience in mind, one that expected good stories rather than political history. Taking into consideration the variables that lead to literary production, Theophilos' on the whole successful reign could not eradicate the stigma of Iconoclasm. This, I believe, is why the unanimous condemnation of Theophilos' religious policy was appended to the last moment of his life, to accentuate his divergence from the popular veneration of images.

One of the characteristics of Byzantine historiography is to follow tradition rather than seek separate evidence, and this tendency characterizes Theophilos' death narrative. Genesios and Theophanes Continuatus created a literary tradition around Theophilos' death, from which subsequent authors did not diverge substantially. Exception to this were a few details, such as the request for the non-restoration of icons as a commentary shortly after his death initiated by Zonaras and followed by Glykas and Skylitzes.[96] Following a tradition or copying an earlier work does not presuppose that events and protagonists are treated in the same manner. Genesios and Theophanes Continuatus made independent use of the same sources,[97] but when it came to Theophilos' death differed in the moment they deemed final. For Genesios it was Theophilos' address to Theophobos; for Theophanes Continuatus it was his kissing of an icon: we thus find two opposing tenth-century portrayals of the same ruler. Pseudo- Symeon uses Genesios' and Theophanes Continuatus' common source,[98] although when it comes to the case of Theophilos his account resembles

93 Jenkins, 'The classical background', 15. See also R. Scott, 'The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Historiography', in M. Mullett and R. Scott (eds), *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition* (Birmingham 1981), 61-74, esp. 69-70.

94 A. Markopoulos, 'From narrative historiography to historical biography. New trends in Byzantine historical writing in the 10th–11th centuries', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 102 (2009) 697-715 (702).

95 Bekker, *Theophanes Continuatus*, 651.

96 This could be related to the fact both Glykas and Zonaras used Skylitzes: see Karpozēlos, *Βυζαντινοὶ ἱστορικοί* III, 480, 486, 587, 596.

97 Kaldellis, *Genesios*, xi; so too Featherstone and Codoñer, *Chronographiae*, 11.*

98 Zuckerman, 'Emperor Theophilos'.

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more closely that of Theophanes Continuatus. For Skylitzes, two main facts related to Theophilos' death (Theophobos and the speech) are similar in chronological sequence but differ in content. In the version by Skylitzes, Theophilos' speech included three additional details (confirmation of support, prayer, conspiracy) not found in Theophanes Continuatus. Despite Skylitzes' extensive use of the first four books of Theophanes Continuatus, it has been claimed that 'there are reasons to suppose that Skylitzes had a better text of Theophanes Continuatus [. . .], so that his reading may be accepted in the edition as the correct one.'[99] What is, however noteworthy in the three accounts of Theophilos' speech (including that by Genesios) is primarily the emperor's concern for the family he was leaving behind and the confirmation that his request would not be granted, in recognition of his successful reign, good conduct, and generosity towards his subjects.

The information passed down into histories depends largely on the sources that writers choose to use or were available to them. It also depends on the writer's stance towards an emperor and perception of his legacy; often the religious policy pursued was critical to the way a particular reign was assessed.[100] Even though the accounts are contradictory, what we also need to consider is how frequently the death was written about. This is an indication that a death had some sort of symbolic power which later writers wished to confirm or challenge. There is no doubt that the description of the moment of death played an important role in the enhancement or repudiation of an emperor's reputation for future readers. Theophilos' death is a strong example: Considering that his religious policy aroused hatred against him and that his passing is the third most commonly referenced death in Byzantine historiography and the most popular among iconoclast emperors, it seems that his death symbolized the victory of the Iconophile party.

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99 Featherstone and Codoñer; *Chronographiae Quae Theophanis*, *20.

100 This is the case with Julian the Apostate, Justinian I and Theophilos, to name a few.

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