

## SAINT PHOTIUS, THE PATRIARCH OF CONSTANTINOPLE: BIRTH, CHILDHOOD AND HIS ASCENSION TO THE IMPERIAL COURT

VIRGIL CERCEȘ\*

**ABSTRACT.** The present article provides information about the life of Photius the Patriarch before his enthronement, as well as a sketch of the life in the byzantine society, the political and religious framework at the moment of Photius's ascension. The first part of the article presents more opinions about Photius's date of birth. Many researchers express their opinions concerning his date of birth, starting with the years 810 until 827. Then the article outlines the problem of Photius's family origin and his childhood. Furthermore, it brings about the issue of Photius's education. It presents his ascension to the imperial court, as well as the fact that the byzantine society was divided into two parties of the hardliners and of the liberals. The last part of the article presents the political and religious framework before Photius's enthronement as a patriarch.

**Key-words:** Photius, Patriarch, childhood, ascension, parties.

Photius reveals himself to the world as a complex personality, belonging to a very tumultuous period of history, the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, period which, throughout his actions, he also influenced and dominated. Nowadays, his personality still stirs the curiosity, the admiration but also the opposition of the ones who are in search of a few things about the life and thinking of this great father of the postpatristic Eastern Church. Within the Orthodox Church, he received, immediately after his death, the name the Great. Endowed with an exceptional intellectual ability, he managed to evince himself as being a great intellectual and bibliophile of his time, fact revealed also by the fact that, throughout his first exile, he constantly complained to the emperor of missing his dear books.

---

\* Pr. Drd., Babeș-Bolyai University, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, email: cercesvirgil@yahoo.com

## 1. Opinions concerning Photius's date of birth

As far as Photius's date of birth is concerned, we do not possess certain information, but only suppositions based on calculations related to certain events from his life. J.Hergenröther<sup>1</sup> acknowledges as the great patriarch's date of birth, the year 827. He argues his hypothesis, taking into account the year 858, when Photius was ordained. He also argues that at the time he was ordained, Photius must have been at least 30 years old, fact also stipulated in the canons; if things had been differently, his opponents would have upbraided, among others, this as well. His statement is largely based on calculations related to the life of Photius's apprentice, Constantine Cyrill, who was born in 827 and died, being only 42 years old, in the year 869. Constantine Cyrill was very close to the patriarch Photius, who, at his turn, was his teacher. In the year 850, Photius was already a professor at the University of Constantinople. Having in view all these connections, Hergenröther proposes 827 as Photius's birth year.<sup>2</sup>

Some researchers, for instance, Karl Krumbacher<sup>3</sup>, Francis Dvornik<sup>4</sup>, Hans-Georg Beck<sup>5</sup>, Despina Stratoudaki White<sup>6</sup> set as Photius's date of birth 820, a year that is found agreeable by most dictionaries containing personalities and theologians from the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Hergenröther, *Photius, patriarch von Konstantinopel. Sein Leben, seine Schriften und das griechische Schisma*, vol.1, (Darmstadt, 1966), 315.

<sup>2</sup> Hergenröther, 315 and Pr.Dr. Lucian D. Colda, *Patriarhul Fotie cel Mare al Constantinopolului: Contribuții la dezvoltarea Teologiei*, (Alba-Iulia: Reîntregirea Publishing Hoose, 2012), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Krumbacher states that he was born around the year 820 and further specifies that he was certainly not born after the year 827. Karl Krumbacher, *Geschichte de byzantinischen Literatur von Justinian bis zum Ende des oströmischen Reiches (527-1453)* (München 1891), 223. <https://archive.org/stream/geschichtederbyz00krumuoft#page/223/mode/1up> (accessed May, 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> F. Dvornik, *Photios, Patriarch*, in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche. Achter Band*, (Verlag-Herder-Freiburg, 1963): 484.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Georg Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur byzantinischen Reich*, (München, 1959), 520 - <http://www.scribd.com/doc/54944991/Beck-Kirche-Und-Theologische-Literatur-Im-Byzantinischen-Reich-Beck-1959#scribd> (accessed May, 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Referring to Photius's date of birth, Despina Stratoudaki White, states that: ... *As far as his age is concerned, Photius, has, occasionally given indirect references. He names Patriarch Nikoforos his contemporary...that he was young when he wrote The Lexikon and very old and tired when he finished his Amphilochia... Another important point in establishing Photius's age is the information provided by him referring to the anathema on his father, his uncle- Tarasios, and on himself, anathema given by the last iconoclast synod in 837.* She proposes as Photius's date of birth the year 820, thus, siding with most biographers of the great patriarch. In: Despina Stratoudaki White, *Patriarch Photios of Constantinople, his life, scholarly contributions, and correspondence together with a translation of fifty-two of his letters* (Brookline, Massachusetts, 1981) 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> D. Colda, *Patriarhul Fotie cel Mare...*, p.30.

Among Romanian researchers, Father Professor Ioan Irimia proposes 815 as Photius's year of birth, because, he says: "...on December, 25<sup>th</sup> 858, when he first put himself in appearance as a patriarch, he appeared to have a rich experience."<sup>8</sup> He also proposes 815 as the year of birth for both Photius and Ioan Bria<sup>9</sup>.

Father Professor Milan Şesan says that when he was ordained as patriarch, Photius was ... 38 years old...<sup>10</sup> that is why he gives out 820 as Photius's year of birth.

820 is also the year Father Professor Doctor Vasile V. Munteanu proposes for Photius's birth<sup>11</sup>. The same year is given also by Priest Prof. Dr. Emilian Voiutschi.<sup>12</sup>

Panaghiotis K. Hristou, former professor of patrology at the University "Aristotle" from Thessalonica, says that Photius .... 'Εγεννήθη πιθανῶς περὶ τὸ 820 εἰς τὴν πρωτεύουσαν, τὴν Κωνσταντινούπολιν...<sup>13</sup>

Hristos S. Voulgaris, honoured professor of the University from Athens, tells us that Photius ... Γεννηθεὶς περὶ τὸ 820 ἐκ γονέων ἀριστοκρατικῆς καταγωγῆς...<sup>14</sup>. The same year of Photius's birth, 820, is also given by Vasiliou Laourdas<sup>15</sup>. Constantin N. Tsirpanlis, professor of the Church History and Patristics in New York proposes 810 as year of Photius's birth.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Priest Prof. Ioan Irimia, *Conflictul religios dintre Roma și Constantinopol în timpul patriarhului Fotie (The Religious conflict between Rome and Constantinople during Photius's Patriarchy)*, in: *Luminătorul*, 1-2 (LXXVI-1943): 655.

<sup>9</sup> Deacon Ioan Bria, *La împlinirea a 1100 de ani de la Enciclica patriarhului Fotie al Constantinopolului către patriarhii răsăriteni (1100 years from the Letter of patriarch Photius of Constantinople towards the eastern patriarchs)*, in: *Ortodoxia*, 4 (XIX -1967): 608.

<sup>10</sup> Priest Prof. Dr. Milan Şesan, *Patriarhul Fotie și Roma (Patriarch Photius and Rome)*, in: *Mitropolia Ardealului*, 7 (1960): 548.

<sup>11</sup> Priest Prof. Dr. Vasile V. Munteanu, *Bizantinologie (Byzanthology) (Învierea Arhiepiscopia Timișoarei Publishing House, 1999)*, 136.

<sup>12</sup> Priest Prof. Dr. Emilian Voiutschi, *Istoria literaturii și moralei creștine (The History of the Christian literature and ethics)*, in: *Candela*, 10 (XXV, 1906): 45.

<sup>13</sup> ΠΑΝΑΓΙΩΤΗΣ Κ.ΧΡΗΣΤΟΥ, ΜΕΓΑΣ ΦΩΤΙΟΣ, Ο ΛΟΓΙΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΓΩΝΙΣΤΗΣ ΙΕΡΑΡΧΗΣ, ΚΑΤΕΡΙΝΗ (1965), 4.

"...He was probably born towards the year 820, in the capital of Constantinople..."

<sup>14</sup> ΧΡΗΣΤΟΥ ΣΠ. ΒΟΥΛΓΑΡΗΣ, Ο ΜΕΓΑΣ ΦΩΤΙΟΣ ΩΣ ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣΤΙΚΗ ΚΑΙ ΕΘΝΙΚΟΣ ΑΓΩΝΙΣΤΗΣ, ΑΘΗΝΑΙ (1977), 5. - "... He was born towards the year 820 from parents of aristocratic origin ..."

<sup>15</sup> "Ο Φώτιος ἐγεννήθη εἰς τὴν Κωνσταντινούπολιν περὶ τὸ 820 ἀπὸ γονεὶς κατέχοντας ἀνωτάτας θέσεις εἰς τὴν κοινωνίαν τῆς προτενοῦσης τῆς Βυζαντινῆς αὐτοκρατορίας." ΦΩΤΙΟΥ ΟΜΙΛΙΑΙ, ΕΚΔΟΣΙΣ ΚΕΙΜΕΝΟΥ ΕΙΣΑΓΩΓΗ ΚΑΙ ΣΧΟΛΙΑ ΥΠΟ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΟΥ ΛΑΟΥΡΔΑΣ, ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗ (1959), 4 - "Photius was born at Constantinople towards the year 820 from parents belonging to the highest position in the byzantine society from the capital."

<sup>16</sup> Constantine N. Tsirpanlis, *Saint Photius as missionary and true ecumenical father*, in *Εκκλησία καὶ Θεολογία*, Τομος Ε, (1984): 436.

Historians such as Warren T. Treadgold<sup>17</sup> and P. Stéphanou<sup>18</sup> propose 810 as the Great Patriarch's date of birth.

All the ones setting their attention upon Photius's year of birth, have calculated it taking into account certain well-known events from the great patriarch's life, for instance: the iconoclast persecution, the delegation sent to the Arab Court, the ascension of the patriarchal throne, etc.

## 2. Photius's family and childhood years

All the researchers have agreed upon the fact that Photius comes from a noble family from Constantinople<sup>19</sup>, and François Dvornik further specifies that "...*et était parent avec la dynastie macédonienne*"<sup>20</sup>. His father, named Serghie, and his mother, named Irene, have suffered, as a result of their attachment towards icons, during the iconoclastic period of emperor Theophilos (829-842)<sup>21</sup>.

---

<sup>17</sup> Warren T. Treadgold, *The Nature of the Bibliotheca of Photius*, (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 1980), 18.

<sup>18</sup> "Born around the year 810, Photius belonged to one of the most prominent families from Constantinople." P. Stephanou, *Photius, patriarche de Constantinople*, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Ascétique et Mystique*, 12, (1984): 1397. <http://www.histoireebook.com/index.php?post/2012/03/14/Dictionnaire-de-spiritualite-Tome-04-Premiere-partie> (accessed on May, 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

<sup>19</sup> F. Dvornik, *Le schisme de Photius histoire et legende*, (Paris, 1950), 31 ("... and he was related to the Macedonian dynasty."); ΧΡΗΣΤΟΥ ΣΠ. ΒΟΥΓΑΡΗΣ, 5; .... *We know that he was born in a noble family from Constantinople...* Pr. Ene Ionel, *Patriarhul Fotie al Constantinopolului (Patriarch Photius of Constantinople)*, (Episcopia Buzăului și a Vrancei Publishing House, 2003):5.

<sup>20</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Photius himself refers to his parents' suffering during the iconoclastic period, in a letter meant to comfort his brother, Tarasie, who was hurting as a result of a child's death: *We mustn't betray our parents' praised and courageous acts, because they met their deaths differently from the ones we know. Let us be spared of such things; these forefathers were tormented with fire and water, and although at that time they were threatened with bitter and heavy proscription, being thus left without friends and relatives, although they were separated from the ones who could offer them comfort, they received everything with joy; and they praised the Lord, unlike the ones who judge human things according to the human mind.*- J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Greacă (The Greek Patrology)*, vol.102, col. 972, <https://archive.org/details/patrologiaecurs11migngoog>, (accessed on May, 14<sup>th</sup> 2015) - translated by Asterios Gerostergios, *Sfântul Fotie cel Mare*, translated from English by Marius Popescu, (Bucharest, Sofia Publishing House, 2005): 14; see also: F.A., *Viața și nevoințele celui între sfinți părintelui nostru Fotie cel mare, Patriarhul Constantinoplei (The life and trials of the one amongst the saints, our father, Photius the Great, patriarch of Constantinople)*, translated by Constantin Făgețeanu after the edition: *The Lives of the Pillars of Orthodoxy*, (Buena Vista, Colorado, USA, Holy Apostles Convent and Dormition Skete, 1990), (Cartea Ortodoxă Publishing House, Egumenița Publishing House): 12. You may also see: Pr.Prof.Dr. T. Bodogae, *O epistolă a patriarhului Fotie și semnificația ei (An epistle of patriarch Photius and its meaning)*, in: *Mitropolia Banatului*, 10-12, (XXXII -1982): 613-623.

Thus, his parents are honored as testifying saints and are written as such in the byzantine synaxarium on May, 13<sup>th</sup>.<sup>22</sup> In one of his epistles,<sup>23</sup> Photius exalts his father, describing him as being a courageous, pious person who has evidenced himself "... through a richness of true belief, through just faith ... and through ... proscription and martyrdom."<sup>24</sup> About his mother, he says: ... and mother [was] loving of God, loving of virtues...<sup>25</sup>. They belonged to one of the most honoured families from Byzantium.<sup>26</sup> His father, Serghie, had, at the imperial court, the function of spatharios, that is leader of the imperial guard. His father's brother, Tarasie, was the Patriarch of Constantinople between 784 and 806. Tarasie was sanctified by the Orthodox Church and as a result he is celebrated on February, 25<sup>th</sup>. Tarasie was also the one who presided the seventh Ecumenical Synod from Nicaea in 787. He also had four other brothers who were called: Constantine, Serghie, Tarasius and Theodor. His family was related to the imperial family itself.<sup>27</sup> The aristocrat Serghios, brother of Photius's mother, was married to Irene, empress Theodora's sister.<sup>28</sup>

It is very difficult to establish the exact circumstances of Photius's education. Having also in view the fact that his parents were exiled because of their attitude towards worshipping the icons, the place and the school that Photius attended become even more difficult to determine. Who were the teachers with whom Photius studied? Was he only a self-taught person?<sup>29</sup> These are questioned that, so far, haven't been given a precise answer.

The fact that he became a remarkable erudite from a very early age, a very subtle philosopher and an excellent theologian makes us believe that he reached

---

<sup>22</sup> J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graecă (The Greek Patrology)*, vol.102, col. 877 C. – <https://archive.org/stream/patrologicursus19migngoog#page/n429/mode/1up> (accessed on May, 25<sup>th</sup> ) and Asterios Gerostergios, 14.

<sup>23</sup> It is about Photius's Epistle of Enthronement addressed to the Patriarchal Chair of Antiochia, see Johannes N. Baletta ed., *Photios Patriarchos Constantinopolitanos, [Epistolae] ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΑΙ*, (New York: Georg Olms Verlag Hildesheim, 1978), 143.

<sup>24</sup> Baletta, 145 – translated by Asterios Gerostergios, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Baletta, 145 "... και μήτηρ φιλόθεός τε και φιλάρετος ...".

<sup>26</sup> ΠΑΝΑΓΙΩΤΗΣ Κ. ΧΡΗΣΤΟΥ, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Asterios Gerostergios, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Asterios, Gerosterios, 13.

<sup>29</sup> The protoprezbyterian Teodor Zisis, professor at Aristotle University from Tesalonic states the following: "...referring to whether Photius was a self-taught person or he had teachers, we make a note here that these two opinions do not mutually exclude and that, on the contrary, they complement each other. He had teachers and attended courses of the schools in Constantinople, but, at the same time, largely due to his great intelligence and to his on-going study of the books he never parted from, Photius instructed himself and he surpassed his teachers." in: Teodoros Zisis, *A fost Sfântul Fotie cel Mare umanist? (Was Saint Photius the Greatest Humanist?)*, in: Tabor, 3, VIII (March, 2014), 16.

this performance after systematic and developed studies around a professor:<sup>30</sup> *Photius's genius was still above his birth. He possessed a great and carefully cultivated spirit. His fortune facilitated him the access to all kinds of books; and his passion for glory went so far as spending his nights in reading. Thus, he became the most learned man, not only of his time, but also of former periods. He knew grammar, poetics, rhetoric, philosophy, medicine and all profane sciences; he hadn't neglected, however, the theological science and, when he found himself in the Church, he was already very learned in all church things.*"<sup>31</sup>

Even those who, later on, questioned his actions as patriarch, expressed their admiration towards Photius, when they spoke about his erudition. Thus, one of Photius's strongest opponents, that is, patriarch Ignatius Nicetas the Paphlagonian, stated, according to his biographer, the following about Photius's erudition: *"Photius didn't come from low and unimportant people, but from amongst the noble, being thus a prominent figure. He was respected for his wisdom and for his profane culture more than any other person involved in politics. He knew grammar, poetry, rhetoric and philosophy; likewise medicine and generally any profane science of his time. His intellectual superiority was of such kind that he seemed to surpass his generation and overtake the ancient authorities."*<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> According to this conviction we may assume that Photius was instructed by the famous philosopher and mathematician Leon, former archbishop of Tesalonic, after the latter, being dismissed from the Chair, returned to Constantinople and resumed his activity as a professor. Asterios Gerostergios, 18. Also, Teodoros Zisis states that "... *Leon the Philosopher and the Mathematician, was also Photius's professor.*" Teodoros Zisis, 16. Father Iustin Popovici states that after having studied literature, mathematics, Aristotle's philosophy and Plato's learning, young Photius spent a lot of time with the Holy Bible and the Holy Fathers of the Church and he did this guided by some wise men and by a confessor whose names are not known. According to: Iustin Popovici, *The Life of Saint Photios the Great, in On the Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*, (NY: Studion Publishers, 1983), 36 and F.A., *Viața și nevoințele celui ... (Life and trials of..., p.14.*

<sup>31</sup> Claude Fleury, *Histoire Ecclesiastique*, Tome onzieme, Depuis l'an 858 jusques l'an 925, (Paris): 5-6, <https://archive.org/details/historiqueeccls00fabrgoog> (accessed on March, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015) - "*Le genie de Photius étoit encore au dessus de sa naissance: il avoit l'esprit grand & cultivé avec un grand soin. Ses richesses lui faisoient trouver facilement toutes sortes de livres; & sa passion pour la gloire alloit jusques à passer les nuits à la lecture. Aussi devint-il le plus savant homme, non seulement de son siècle, mais des precedens. Il scavoit la grammaire, la poétique, la retorique, la philosophie, la medicine & toutes sciences profanes: mais il n'avoit pas négligé la science ecclesiastique; & quand il se vit en place il s'y rendit très savant.*"

<sup>32</sup> J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Greacă*, vol.105, col.509, <http://books.google.com/books?id=KDMRAAAAYAAJ> (accessed on September, 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014) - "*Ἦν δ οὗτος ὁ Φώτιος οὐ τῶν ἀγεννῶν τε καὶ ἀνωνύμων, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν εὐγενῶν κατὰ σάρκα, καὶ περιφανῶν, σοφία τε κοσμηκῆ καὶ συνέσει τῶν ἐν τῇ πολιτείᾳ στρεφομένων εὐδοκίμωτατος πάντων ἐνομιζέτο. Γραμματικῆς μὲν γὰρ καὶ ποιήσεως, ρητορικῆς τε καὶ φιλοσοφίας, ναὶ δὴ καὶ ἰατρικῆς, καὶ πάσης ὀλίγου δεῖν ἐπιστήμης τῶν θύραθεν τοσοῦτον αὐτῷ τό περιόν, ὡς μὴ μόνον σχεδὸν φάνα τῶν κατὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ γενεᾶν πάντων διενεγκεῖν, ἤδη δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς παλαιούς αὐτὸν διαμιλλᾶσθαι.*" Translated into Romanian by Asterios Gerostergios, 18-19.

From his letters we find out that he enjoyed a lonely life, far from the turmoil of society. Thus, in a letter he states about himself "... *When I was young, I wanted very much to live alone*"<sup>33</sup> and "...*in my childhood I decided to stay away from problems and noise and to enjoy the peaceful pleasures of a secluded life.*"<sup>34</sup>

### 3. The society of Constantinople during young Photius's ascension

It appears that Photius was quite young when he managed to become a professor of philosophy at the University of Constantinople.<sup>35</sup> We don't exactly know the year. It is supposed that not before the death of the iconoclast emperor Theophilus (829-842). His vast knowledge has allowed him, however, to teach also logic, dialectics, theology, etc.<sup>36</sup> Talking about this period of Photius's life Father Professor Milan Šesan says that: "*He organized the courses of the Patriarchal Academy and he established a supplementary course at the Holy Apostles Church, where he was teaching philosophy, rhetoric and grammar; then the University further introduced in 856 the course of religious philosophy...*"<sup>37</sup>

The fame he achieved, as well as his good relations with the palace, having his brother Tarasius, there, but especially due to his uncle, Serghie, Irene's husband (Irene being Theodora's sister), all these helped Photius to enter the life of the imperial court<sup>38</sup>.

During this period, the byzantine society was divided. The political and religious life was orbiting around two parties that were always in opposition for the patriarchal as well as for the imperial throne<sup>39</sup>. This feud will also be found later on

<sup>33</sup> It is about Photius's epistle of enthronement on the Constantinople Chair, epistle addressed to the Antiochia's patriarchal chair. See: *Photios Patriarchos Constantinopolitanos, [Epistolae] ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΑΙ...*, 145. Translated into Romanian at Asterios Gerostergios, 19.

<sup>34</sup> J.P. Migne, *The Greek Patrology*, vol.102, col. 585B – <http://www.archive.org/details/patrologiaecurs11mignooog> (accessed on August, 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Translated into Romanian at Asterios Gerostergios, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Dvornik states without specifying the year that: "...*u. schon früh wurde Ph. Durch Theoktistos, den ersten Minister der Kaiserin Theodora II, Prof. der Philosophie an der kaiserl Hochschule. - very early was Photius, professor of philosophy by Teoctist, minister of Theodora, 2<sup>nd</sup>, at the Imperial University of Constantinople.*" Dvornik, *Photios.....*, col.484; Pr. Dr. Lucian D. Colda says the following: "... *young Photius, only 20 years old, started as a professor of philosophy at the Imperial University of Constantinople*", Colda, 32; also: C. Cappizi, *Photios*, hl., Patriarch von Konstantinopel, in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 8 (1999), 267-268.

<sup>36</sup> Hergenrother, 324-327 and Colda, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Pr.Prof.Dr. Milan Šesan, *Despre teologia postpatristică (About the postpatristic theology)*, in *Mitroplia Ardealului*, 4-6 (IX, 1966): 285.

<sup>38</sup> Dvornik, *Photios*, 484.

<sup>39</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 35. For more details see: Pr.Prof.Dr. Milan Šesan, *Schisma între Patriarhii Fotie și Ignatie? (The schism between Patriarchs Photius and Ignatius?)* (Cernăuți: 1936), 17.

in the conflict between Ignatius and Photius. The origin of this division must be identified in the history of the Byzantine Empire, right before the iconoclastic period, further back at the beginning of life in Constantine's city and even further in some of old Rome's institutions, from which many things had been transferred, in new shapes and adapted to the oriental Christian society.<sup>40</sup>

If in the old Rome, there were more than one party, for instance the greens', the blues', the reds' and the whites' parties, in Byzantium we will find only two parties, the greens and the blues.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Dvornik says: "*It is a certain fact that the religious evolution of Byzantium and of the whole Orient is inseparable from the rivalry game of the main parties of the greens and blues. They came to consider themselves as the forefront factors in the religious and political life of the empire.*"<sup>42</sup>

Adopting these groups into the life of the Constantinople Church was possible because the Oriental Christianity was of national type<sup>43</sup>, a great number of population taking part actively in the divine cult as well as in the theological disputes that occurred. It may be especially noticed that, in the monophysite conflict, the two groups of the greens and blues were on opposing sides.<sup>44</sup>

Emperor Heraclius (610-640) is the one who succeeded in ending these factions<sup>45</sup>, which, as a result of their disputes endangered the safety of the empire. Nevertheless, the actions of these two groups can be identified in the two currents, one more liberal and moderate and the other more conservative and intolerant, currents that never ceased to be in opposition with one another. These actions appear very clearly in the feud against the icons, especially after the cult of the icons was re-established by Empress Irene.

In the new context, the feuds between the two groups appear to be different, the oiconomy or the liberal politics of compromise and the ultraconservatory hardliners who tried to see that the precepts of the church were observed in all their strictness.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 35 "...qui furent transférées à Byzance, imprégnées d'un hellénisme chrétien, pour prendre des formes que les citoyens de la République romaine n'auraient jamais reconnues."

<sup>41</sup> Dvornik, *The Circus in Byzantium, Their Evolution and Suppression*, in *Byzantina-Metabyzantina*, (New-York: 1946), 119-133.

<sup>42</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 35 "*Ce qui est certain c'est que l'évolution religieuse de Byzance et de tout l'Orient est inséparable du jeu des rivalités entre les principaux partis de Cirque des Bleu set des Verts. Ils en vinrent même à se poser comme les facteurs de premier plan dans la vie religieuse et politique de l'empire.*"

<sup>43</sup> Șesan, *Schismă între Patriarhii*, 14. See also: F. Dvornik, *National Churches and the Church Universal*, (London: 1944).

<sup>44</sup> Dvornik, *The Circus in Byzantium*, 119-133.

<sup>45</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Șesan, *Shismă între Patriarhii*, 10.



This was the state of the byzantine society at the time when young Photius being remarked as a young man with great perspectives at the byzantine court. Was he going to resist the temptation of being drawn into one of these groups and remain only in the domain of literary activity<sup>47</sup> without being involved in politics and dedicated to church only? The frequent theological controversies created a positive environment, whereas the iconoclast persecutions left deep scars within the byzantine society.

Starting from the writings of Photius's main enemy, F. Dvornik observed that in their writings there was a tone of anger and virulence, that didn't come only from a simple excess of religious fervor, so: *"The political tendency is much too obvious from under the layer of moral and religious considerations. These writings have all the characteristics of the political and religious pamphlets and they are the proof that in the Byzantium of Photius's time, there were two hostile clans who were fighting to control the church and the state."*<sup>48</sup>

#### **4. The political and religious framework preceding Photius's election as patriarch**

At the time when Photius was making his cultural and political debut, the empire was ruled by the widow empress Theodora, who, together with the Teoctist Logothete, was ensuring the regency of young underage king, Michael, 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>49</sup>

Among the persons who were highly influential in ruling the empire from this period, was also the commander of the armies, Manuel, who was particularly liked by the high majority of the masses and who, if possible, could have even been chosen as emperor instead of Michael, 3<sup>rd</sup>. Manuel felt intense hatred of the young king and he would have gladly done anything to overthrow him.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the patrician Bardas, Theodora's brother, had also a great influence at the palace and he secretly envied both the Teoctist Logothete and Manuel, plotting to remove them from court.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 34 - *"La tendance politique est par trop évidente sous le vernis de considérations religieuses et morales. Ces écrits ont toutes les caractéristiques de pamphlets politico-religieux et sont le produit de l'existence à Byzance, au temps de Photius, de deux clans hostiles qui se disputaient le contrôle de l'Eglise et de l'Etat."*

<sup>49</sup> Hergenröther, 339.

<sup>50</sup> Colda, 39.

<sup>51</sup> Colda, 39.

All the things mentioned above made Theodora's regency a difficult thing to achieve. In the turmoil of these intrigues, Manuel retired, giving the Teoctist limitless powers in the activities of the empire.<sup>52</sup>

As far as the church things are concerned, these were not at all clearer. Much too often, the mixture of politics in the activities of the church brought about a lot of troubles, disturbing the peace within the church and producing deep wounds within the ecclesial structures. The triumph of Orthodoxy was still extremely fragile. A lot of the iconoclasts were still having important functions in the structures of the Empire and Church. It was seriously questioned the issue of truthfully reporting to them. Their replacement with others raised another issue, as it was necessary to find capable people of running the affairs of the Church and Empire. Then, let us not forget that, amongst the iconoclasts there were remarkable intellectuals. Speaking about the way in which the church had to deal with the ones who sided with the iconoclasts, there were two major opposing points of view: one of the liberals, who supported the iconoclasts who repented their heresy and asked to be received back in the church; and the other, of the hardliners, who asked for the removal of any clerical functions, as well as the excommunication of all the ones who were guilty of heresy. Therefore, we can say that, although the Orthodoxy had won, the peace within the church was far from being installed. The population was again divided in two opposing factions: the liberals and the extremists.

As far as the imperial court is concerned, this was willing to establish peace within the church and therefore favored the liberal group who was asking for the oiconomy to be applied. Empress Theodora, who sympathised with the extremists, understood very well that the interests of the dynasty required discretion.<sup>53</sup> Dvornik says that: *"We are surprised to find out from the writings of the chronographs that she almost opposed the official reestablishment of the icons' cult and that she could be convinced only by arguments brought by the Teoctist and her relative, magister Serghie."*<sup>54</sup>

The iconoclast patriarch John the Grammarian (836-843) had been removed from his clerical function<sup>55</sup>. Empress Theodora refused to choose one of the candidates proposed by the hardliners, although these presented numerous names - Anastasius of Sacudion, Naucratius of Studion, the archbishop Katasambas

---

<sup>52</sup> Hergenröther, 340.

<sup>53</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 43.

<sup>54</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 43 - *"On est surpris d'apprendre, par les récits des chronographes, qu'elle s'opposait presque au rétablissement officiel du culte des images et qu'elle ne se laissa convaincre que par les arguments de Théoctiste et de son parent, le magister Serge."*

<sup>55</sup> Asterios Gerostergios, 28.

of Nicomidia as well as the metropolitan bishop of Kizikos<sup>56</sup>. Eventually she accepted the nomination of a man inclined to peace, named Methodius (800-847), a Sicilian monk and priest.<sup>57</sup>

The main concern of the newly named bishop was to bring peace within the church, at the same time keeping the strict limits of orthodoxy. Thus, he dismissed all the ones who kept on going on the iconoclast heresy, as well as the ones who, after saying they abandon their heresy, they returned to it. The ones showing sincere repentance were taken back within orthodoxy and they preserved their functions.<sup>58</sup>

Methodius avoided naming extremists in the vacant chairs and he chose moderate candidates.

This was largely due to the fact that he remembered very well how, after the first reestablishment of the icons' veneration, the exaggerated enthusiasm of the extremists made possible the return of the heresy. All these, however, did nothing but bring about a lot of hatred towards the new patriarch, especially from the extremists called the Studites, who had suffered mostly during the iconoclastic persecutions. That is why the new state of things within the church seemed to them an unacceptable compromise.<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, the new patriarch looked askance at the canonical, strict attitude of the studites and he fell into conflict with them. The studite monks were discontented with the fact that Methodius kept some former bishops in the Church's chairs, bishops who didn't intellectually raise at the level of the studites, as well as with the fact that the synod had decided to forgive the last iconoclast emperor Theophilus (829-842), after his death. In all these, they saw nothing but indifference at their sacrifice in the battle against heresy and an impiety against the memory of their father, Saint Theodore the Studite (759-826), who in dispute with Tarasius (784-806) and Nicephorus 1<sup>st</sup> (806-815), favoured *akribeia* (i.e. the exact, strict canonical application of Church rules).<sup>60</sup> As a result of this situation, the studite monks will roughly criticize the actions of the new patriarch, posing themselves as the defenders of the icons.

---

<sup>56</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 43.

<sup>57</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 44.

<sup>58</sup> Colda, 40; V. Laurent, *Méthode de Constantinople (Saint)*, in; Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique (lettre M), VOL.10, p.1599-1603 – [http://jesusmarie.free.fr/dictionnaire\\_de\\_theologie\\_catholique\\_lettre\\_M.html](http://jesusmarie.free.fr/dictionnaire_de_theologie_catholique_lettre_M.html) (accessed on June, 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015) and Daniel Stiernon, *Constantinople IV*, translated by Andrés Ibanez Arana, Victoria editorial eset (1969), 13-14 -<http://www.liburuklik.euskadi.net/handle/10771/26978>.

<sup>59</sup> Şesan, *Schismă între Patriarhii*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Colda, 41.

The conflict degenerated so much that, it took a tragic turn, eventually leading to a new schism within the Church.<sup>61</sup> Methodius asked the studites to publicly condemn everything Theodore the Studite had spoken against the patriarchs Tarasius and Nicephorus 1<sup>st</sup>. Such a thing was unconceivable for the studite monks, these refusing and preferring a new rupture with the Constantinople rather than tarring the memory of their father. Eventually, exasperated by the hostile and malicious attitude of the studite monks and all their supporters, patriarch Methodius excommunicated them.<sup>62</sup> Referring to this dispute, Dvornik remarks: “*Methodius seemed to have been actually supported by the monks from Olympus, hermits and anchorites, envious on their brethren from Studion.*”<sup>63</sup>

This situation persisted within the church until the death of patriarch Methodius (+ 847), despite all his efforts to make the studies obey him. The first step towards conciliation was made by Methodius himself. In a fragment of his testament he says the following: “*Receive with honour the confession of the ones who want to repent, because thus, they reject the writings of their father – that is Theodore the Studite – against the holy patriarchs Tarasius and Nicephorus. Give back the dignity of their sacerdotal order to all those who return to the Church with their clean hearts.*”<sup>64</sup>

Therefore, with the death of father Methodius, the situation within the church was a critical one.

The imperial court approved the religious actions of the former patriarch, but it was also worried by the schismatic attitude of the studite monks, all the more so as the empress herself took a fancy towards the uncompromising monks. The latter were struggling to win even more favours from the empress. This was eased also by the fact that Bardas, the empress’s brother, who was part of the regency and sympathiser of the moderates, had been completely dismissed in favor of Teoctist, a eunuch. Seeing the sympathy Bardas was surrounded with amongst the intellectuals and moderates, Teoctist oriented himself and was won by the hardliners’ group inasmuch as the empress Theodora was highly honoured amongst them.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Șesan, *Schismă între Patriarhii*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Șesan, *Schismă între Patriarhii*, 20; F. Dvornik, *Les Slaves, Byzance et Roma au IX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, (Paris: 1926), 128 and Colda, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 45-46. – “*Méthode parait avoir été soutenu à fond par les moines de l’Olympe, les ermites et les hésychastes jaloux de leurs confrères réformés de Studion.*”

<sup>64</sup> I.B. Pitra, *Iuris ecclesiastici graecorum historia et monumenta*, Tome II, Romae 1864 -1868, 362. - [http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/fs1/object/display/bsb10506715\\_00416.html?zoom=0.9000000000000004](http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/fs1/object/display/bsb10506715_00416.html?zoom=0.9000000000000004) (accessed on May, 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015) – “...Τούτους, μετάνοιαν, εἰ θέλοιεν, ἀξιώσατε καὶ εἰς κοινωνίαν προσλάβετε δὴλον δὲ ὅτι κατὰ ἀγιωτάτων πατριαρχῶν Ταρασίου καὶ Νικηφόρου συγγράμματα τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῶν ἀναθεματίζοντας τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ δὲ ὀλοψύχως προσερχομένοις ἀπλοῦ ἱερατικοῦ βαθμοῦ καθ’ ἑαυτούς ἐξουσίαν ἀπόδοτε.” – see the translation in French at: Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 46.

<sup>65</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 49-50.

This being the situation at the imperial court, it was already foreseen that the new chosen patriarch will be from the hardliners' group, in spite of the fact that the fight was hard<sup>66</sup> and difficult. More candidates were talked about.<sup>67</sup> Amongst them, the most important was Gregorius Asbestos, the metropolitan bishop of Syracuse<sup>68</sup>, a classy intellectual who, because his diocese had been invaded by the Saracens, was refuge in Constantinople. He was, in fact, the leader of the moderate party. He was also the biographer and close acquaintance of the former patriarch, Methodius (biography, unfortunately unknown nowadays).<sup>69</sup>

In spite of the fact that he was a favorite, Gregorius Asbestos seems to have been involved in a canonical scandal, as, during his time in Syracuse, he ordained a priest named Zacharias as bishop of Taormina – Sicily, without having the consent of Constantinople.<sup>70</sup> All these had taken place during the time of patriarch Methodius. As a result of this fact, Gregorius Asbestos was trialed by the Church Court and he was given a rightful punishment. Patriarch Methodius, however, raised Gregorius's penalty out of pastoral reasons.<sup>71</sup>

Because of these circumstances, the imperial court led by Empress Theodora, directly intervened in the election of the patriarch, so as to prevent the transformation of the fight between the two parties, in a negative situation for both the church and empire.<sup>72</sup> The empress appointed monk Ignatius as patriarch. He was the son of the former emperor Michael 1<sup>st</sup> Rangabe (811-813) and of Procopia, daughter of the emperor Nicephorus 1<sup>st</sup> Genikos (802-811).<sup>73</sup> After his father, Michael 1<sup>st</sup> Rangabe, had been overthrown and emasculated against his will (a common custom at the time), Ignatius was forced to accept monachism. He was a very pious man, a monk with a harsh, stern life, but also a strong character.

---

<sup>66</sup> Colda, 41.

<sup>67</sup> It is said that among the candidates there were also two sons of the former iconoclast emperor, Leon 5<sup>th</sup>, the Armenian, Vasile and Gregorius. These were, from various reasons, forced to stand aside. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graecă (The Greek Pathrology)*, vol.105, col 500, [http://books.google.com/books?id=h\\_MUAAAQAAJ](http://books.google.com/books?id=h_MUAAAQAAJ) (accessed on December, 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014) Cf. Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 49.

<sup>68</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 49.

<sup>69</sup> Hans-Georg Beck, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române din Imperiul Bizantin (The History of the Romanian Orthodox Church from the Byzantine Empire)*, translated from German and introductory study by Vasile Adrian Cărabă, (Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, 2012) bibliographic note 1, 212.

<sup>70</sup> Asterios Gerostergios, 32.

<sup>71</sup> V.Grumel, *Le Schisme de Grégoire de Syracuse*, in *Echos d' Orient*, vol.39, (1941), 257-267 - [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/rebyz\\_1146-9447\\_1941\\_num\\_39\\_199\\_2962](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/rebyz_1146-9447_1941_num_39_199_2962). (accessed on November, 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

<sup>72</sup> Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 49.

<sup>73</sup> Beck, *Istoria Bisericii. (The History of the Church...)*, 212, see also: Asterios Gerostergios, p.29.

We have information about this patriarch from the paper of Nicetas the Paphlagonian who wrote *Vita Ignatii*<sup>74</sup> (*The life of Ignatius*) stating the following: “... it is more a pamphlet fanatically set against patriarch Photius, rather than an objective biography.”<sup>75</sup> From him we find out that, Ignatius had entered the monastery at the age of 14 and that he had become a priest and prior. Referring to the empress's mixture in Ignatius's election and appointment as patriarch, the same source specifies that Theodora did this fulfilling a prophecy of Saint Theophanes the Confessor, or following the advice of the great confessor at that time, father Ioachinus the Great<sup>76</sup> from mount Olympus.<sup>77</sup> All these have been proven false.<sup>78</sup> Having in view all the above mentioned, we believe that Empress Theodora, eager to avoid an escalation of the turbulences and tensions between the two parties, did not follow to the letter all the procedures for the election of the new patriarch, that is to summon the synod which would have had to choose and present the candidates to the government. According to the testimonies of Theophanous the Continuer<sup>79</sup>, Simon the Magister<sup>80</sup> or Pseudo-Simon and Zonaras<sup>81</sup>, after the empress consulted more influential bishops, including her advisor and most trustworthy person, Logothete Teoctist, she simply appointed Ignatius as patriarch. Later on, this procedure of the empress would be one of the accusations brought against Ignatius by his opponents.

<sup>74</sup> J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graecă* (*The Greek Patrology*), vol. 105, col.487 s.u. – [https://books.google.ro/books?id=h\\_MUAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=ro&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.ro/books?id=h_MUAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=ro&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false) (accessed on May, 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

<sup>75</sup> F. Dölger, *Byznaz und die europäische Staatenwelt. Ausgewählte Vorträge und Aufsätze*, (Speyer am Rhein: 1953), 313 cf. Colda, 43.

<sup>76</sup> It is about Saint Ioachinus the Great from the mount Olympus who lived during the isconoclastic period. He died in 846 and he is celebrated as a saint on November, 4<sup>th</sup>, under the name Saint Pious Ioachinus the Great from Olympus Cf. <http://www.ortodoxism.ro/proloagele/noiembrie/Proloage04Nov.shtml> (accessed on June, 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>77</sup> J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graecă* (*The Greek Patrology*), vol.105, col.501 – <http://books.google.com/books?id=KDMRAAAAYAAJ> (accessed on October, 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014).

<sup>78</sup> Dvornik, *Le schism*, 50 and *Acta Sanctorum Bollandistes*, novembris, tom. II, p. 318. – <https://archive.org/stream/actasanctorum63unse#page/n616/mode/1up> (accessed on May, 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015) - “*Le patriarche Méthode lui avait rendu visite au mont Olympe le 1 novembre de la même année. Personne ne pouvait donc alors prévoir la mort de Méthode, et Théodora ne pouvait pas songer à la désignation de son successeur. Nicéas voulait seulement, par cette affirmation inventée de toutes pièces, faire apparaître comme dénuées de tout fondement les critiques des adversaire d'Ignace relatives à la prétendue hostilité de ce dernier, à la politique religieuse de Méthode.*”

<sup>79</sup> Theophanes Continuatus, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, (Bonn: 1838), 193 – <https://archive.org/details/theophanesconti00theogoog> (accessed on October, 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014) and Dvornik, *Le schisme*, p. 50.

<sup>80</sup> Symeonis Magistri, *Chronographia*, (Bonn: 1838), 657, - <https://archive.org/details/theophanesconti00theogoog> (accessed on December, 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014) and F. Dvornik, *Le schisme*, 50.

<sup>81</sup> Ιωαννου του Ζωναρα, *Επιτομη Ιστοριων*, vol.IV, libri XVI, 4, 14-15 – <https://archive.org/details/theophanesconti00theogoog> (accessed on April, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015) and Dvornik, *Le schisme*, p.50.