

Holy icon or sacred body? The image of the emperor in the iconoclastic controversy

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Throughout Iconoclasm the imperial icon was used in iconophile writings as the major argument in support of icon veneration. It included images of the emperor reproduced in various media and even panel portraits. Although the latter have not survived, they were real objects with a strong presence in the Byzantine system of visual communication. This paper will show that the role of the imperial icon in Byzantine imagery and image theory was closely connected to the perception of the emperor and of the sacred imperial power in Byzantium.

Keywords: Imperial icon; image theory; emperor; icons; Second Council of Nicaea

Two surviving examples of representations of imperial panel portraits from before and after Iconoclasm attest to the continuation of the imperial icon and its veneration. A copper alloy weight dated between the end of the fourth and the late fifth century and an illumination of the Theodore Psalter from 1066 both show images of panel paintings depicting the emperor. On the surface of the weight, a framed imperial portrait includes the busts of two emperors, each wearing *chlamys* and crown while two *Tychai* support the portrait and a female figure kneels before it with hands raised.¹ (Fig. 1) in the Theodore Psalter's illumination, a group of people bow in *proskynesis* before a painted image of the emperor.² (Fig. 2) the gilded panel has a gemmed frame and hangs from a hook. It depicts the emperor standing in splendour,

1 C. Entwistle, 'One-pound commodity weight with imperial figures', in R. Cormack and M. Vassilaki (eds.), *Byzantium 330-1453* (London 2008) no. 117.

2 London, British Library, Ms. Add. 19.352, fol. 202r. For the Theodore Psalter: C. Barber, *Theodore Psalter* (Champaign IL 2000).

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Fig. 1 Copper alloy weight, 4th-5th century (London, The British Museum, inv. no. 1980, 0601.3; photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) licence).

crowned, wearing a purple *chlamys* and a gem-studded *loros*, on a suppedaneum of the same material as his robes. Here, the Biblical, gilded image of Nebuchadnezzar is replaced by an imperial painting.³ In Late Antiquity as in the eleventh century, painted panels of emperors – icons, as they are repeatedly called in primary sources – were understood as objects of veneration. As the mid-sixth century monk Dorotheus of

3 The Greek version of Dan. 3:1 mentions a ‘golden image’ or ‘golden icon/portrait’ (εἰκὼν χρυσοῦ), as the following Greek tradition (e.g. *Concilium Universale Nicaenum Secundum*, ed. E. Lamberz, 3 vols [Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum II.3/1-3] (Berlin 2008-16) (thereafter ACO² 3/1-3), II, 368). It is worth noting that in the Vulgate it becomes a ‘golden statue’ (*statua aurea*).



Fig. 2 The Three Jews Cast into the Fiery Furnace, *Theodore Psalter*, Constantinople, 1066 (photo: ©British Library Board, Add Ms 19352, fol. 202r).

Gaza tells us, they were depicted in bright and precious colours and sometimes showed the use of gold leaf.⁴ They were exhibited as representations of empire – legitimizing objects struck by the imperial workshops, like coins and weights – and were the focus

4 Dorothee de Gaze, *Oeuvres spirituelles*, XVI, 171, ed. L. Regnault and J. de Préville [SC 92] (Paris 1963) 468-9.

of ceremonial acts. That said, the representation of *proskynesis* before the imperial icon in the Theodore Psalter is used here to signify the worship of Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, probably a rather polemical allusion to the reigning emperor Constantine X Doukas (r. 1059-67). The imperial icon, the εἰκὼν τοῦ βασιλέως, noted already by the Church Fathers, played a very important part in iconophile discourse. However, the fact that none survive from any century of the Byzantine period makes it difficult for scholars to discuss imperial panel icons in general and during the iconoclastic period specifically.⁵ In what follows I will attempt to situate the imperial icons within the context of their veneration and meaning over time, focusing on their value across the period of Iconoclasm.

The aim of this paper is to understand a fundamental problem for Byzantine image theory: if the imperial icon proved the closest comparison in describing the value of holy icons, then what was its role across an age that saw *damnatio memoriae* and even the excommunication of certain emperors – notably the iconoclast rulers? Indeed, did the vision of the sacred *basileus* and imperial *basileia* change as a result of the iconoclastic controversy? In order to understand the value of the imperial image, scholars must rely on iconophile texts where references to and quotations of iconoclastic literature are rarely found and, when they are mentioned, are highly biased. As Brubaker and Haldon have demonstrated,⁶ the years between the 730s and 843 are extremely complex, characterized by frequent changes and continuous crises. All of this had a great impact on the perception of the emperor: Iconoclasm was proclaimed by emperors, was frequently seen as an imperial affair in Byzantine written sources, and may have changed the way people perceived the ruler, his image, and the state in Byzantium.⁷

5 Scholars have addressed the role and appearance of the imperial image, in general; but without substantial visual evidence, the particular significance of the imperial panel portrait is often overlooked. See e.g. A. Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin* (Paris 1936) 4-97; G. Dagron, *Décrire et peindre: essai sur le portrait iconique* (Paris 2007) 137-47; A. Eastmond, 'Between icon and idol: the uncertainty of imperial images', in A. Eastmond and L. James (eds.), *Icon and Word: the power of images in Byzantium* (Farnham 2003) 73-85; H. Maguire, 'Earthly and spiritual authority in the imperial image', in K. Mitalaité and A. Vasiliu (eds.), *L'icône dans la pensée et dans l'art: constitutions, contestations, réinventions de la notion d'image divine en contexte chrétien* (Turnhout 2017) 177-217; M. Studer-Karlen, 'The emperor's image in Byzantium. Perceptions and functions', in M. Bacci, M. Studer-Karlen, and M. Vagnoni (eds.), *Meanings and Functions of the Ruler's Image in the Mediterranean World (11th–15th Centuries)* (Leiden 2022) 134-71. For a thorough insight and reflection on the imperial portrait and its role in Byzantine society: K. Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons. Between reality and spirituality in Byzantine art* (Turnhout 2013) 203-31.

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

7 On the imperial character of Iconoclasm in iconophile literature, see e.g. *Vita Nicetae hegumeni Medicii*, 27, in *Acta Sanctorum Aprilis* I, xviii (BHG 1341-2) (thereafter *Vita Nicetae*); *Nicephori Archiepiscopi Constantinopolitani opuscula historica*, ed. De Boor (Leipzig 1880) 166-7 (thereafter *Nicephori Archiepiscopi Constantinopolitani opuscula historica*); tr. in E.A. Fisher, *Ignatios the Deacon, Life of Nicephoros Patriarch of Constantinople*, in A.-M. Talbot (ed.), *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight saints' lives in English translation* (Washington DC 1998) 76-8. Discussion in G. Dagron, *Emperor and*

I will focus on a few texts from different sources: the acts of church councils, hagiography, and treatises by churchmen. However, mine will be a visual inquiry with no philological purpose. Using references to panel portraits as well as imperial images in other media, I will try to sketch a picture of the role of the imperial icon throughout this period, discussing its place in Byzantine visuality and the perception of the emperor. In short, I will trace a path from the imperial icon to the imperial body.

The imperial icon in the defence of icons

One of the most frequent – and, we may infer, most effective – ways to explain the value of an icon in defence of holy images was to compare it to the imperial image, quoting passages on the subject from the Fathers.⁸ The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea⁹ repeatedly invoke four main patristic texts in their defence of icons. The first (erroneously attributed to John Chrysostom by the Council, and in fact written by his opponent, Severianus of Gabala) reminds us that to insult the imperial robe, image, or statue was to insult the emperor himself, an offence punishable by death. It was believed that the affront was made directly to the emperor through his image.¹⁰ Again, quoting Chrysostom (but in fact Severianus), the second passage read at the Council states that honours given to ‘imperial countenances and images’ (βασιλικοὶ χαρακτῆρες καὶ εἰκόνες / *imperiales vultus et imagines*) carried in procession into a city should be addressed as if to the emperor himself.¹¹ The third passage referenced by the Council quoted Basil of Caesarea: ‘honour paid to the image passes over to the archetype’ (ἡ τῆς εἰκόνης τιμὴ ἐπὶ τὸ πρῶτότυπον διαβαίνει).¹² And, though the imperial image is

Priest. *The Imperial office in Byzantium* (Cambridge 2003) 188, and Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium and the Iconoclast Era*, 439.

8 For a reflection on the use of the imperial image as a means to legitimize icon veneration in Byzantine theology: G.B. Ladner, ‘The concept of the image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 7 (1953) 1–34.

9 ACO² 3/1-3.

10 Pseudo-Chrysostomus (= Severianus Gabalensis), *Exposition of the parable of the sower*, ed. J.-P. Migne [PG 63] 544. For this passage: ACO² 3, I, 143; English translation: R. Price (ed.), *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)* (Liverpool 2018) 166 (thereafter Price, *The Acts*). In the Acts, the same concept is repeated elsewhere: ACO² 3, II, 537-8, where it is stated that a much worse punishment will be given to those who insult the image of Christ and the Theotokos: ACO² 3, III, 676, 748; Price, *The Acts*, 391, 480, 520.

11 Pseudo-Chrysostomus (= Severianus Gabalensis), *Homily for the fifth day of Easter on the washing of the feet*, 8, in A. Wenger, ‘Une homélie inédite de Sévérien de Gabala sur le lavement des pieds’, *Revue des Études Byzantines* 25 (1967) 219–34, esp. 225-9. For this passage: ACO² 3, I, 58, 166; ACO² 3, II, 394; Price, *The Acts*, 114, 166, 311. For a brilliant insight on the word χαρακτήρ: Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons*, 90-1.

12 Basile de Césarée, *Sur le Saint-Esprit*, XVIII, 45, 19, ed. B. Pruche [Sources Chrétiennes 17bis] (Paris 1968) 406. In this passage Basil uses the metaphor of the imperial icon to explain the relationship between Father and Son, just as Eusebius a few decades before: *Eusebius Werke VI. Demonstratio evangelica*, V, 4, 10, ed. I.A. Heikel [Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller 23] (Leipzig 1913) 225. For the Acts of Nicaea: ACO² 3, II, 375 and 396; Price, *The Acts*, 303, 312. The same concept is found elsewhere in Basil and in the writings of Epiphanius: Basilius Caesariensis, *Contra Sabellianos et Arium et Anomoeos*, ed.

called 'the emperor' and reproduces the ruler, it does not duplicate him, who is always one and the same. Quoting Athanasius, the fourth passage explains that the imperial image is the 'form and figure' (ἡ μορφή καὶ τὸ εἶδος) of the emperor, as the image bears his likeness; thus, whoever venerates the image venerates the emperor himself.¹³

In the Acts of Nicaea II, several other extracts appear from earlier literature that are related to the contents of these four main passages; and these recur in various texts of different genres from the iconoclastic era. For instance, the writings of John of Damascus, Theodore of Stoudios, and Patriarch Nicephorus either recall the Fathers or quote these texts without explicit reference to a source.¹⁴ Throughout the various phases of the iconoclastic controversy, the argument relied on the imperial image for comparison to support and explain the legitimacy of icon veneration and the need to continue practices long established in Byzantine tradition; and the same Late Antique texts were quoted again and again to provide authority to this argument. However, these passages were not merely literary *topoi*: they provide crucial evidence for the role of imperial icons in Byzantine perception – a role that, as we shall see, did not change over the course of the iconoclastic controversy. In Brubaker's words, *topoi* 'encapsulate some deep-seated and more complex structure of thought particular to a given culture'.¹⁵ In Byzantine literature, the repetition of passages from ancient writers, usually without attribution, demonstrated the author's refinement and knowledge. This holds for iconophile literature at large; and yet, in the Acts of Nicaea II, both in the *regia* by Pope Hadrian and in the fourth session, each Church Father was named with his respective quotations.¹⁶ These passages are also found in other *florilegia*; as, for instance, in John of Damascus' treatises on images, in Patriarch Nicephorus' *Apologeticus*, and in Nicetas of Medicion's writings.¹⁷ By providing the names of the

J.-P. Migne [PG 31] 606-8; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, LXV, 8, 10, ed. K. Holl [Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller 37] (Leipzig 1933) 12.

13 Athanasius, *Oratio III contra Arianos*, V, 5, 3-4, ed. K. Metzler and K. Savvidis, *Athanasios Alexandrinus, Werke, Band I. Die dogmatischen Schriften*, I.3 (Berlin 2000) 315. Here, the imperial icon serves as an example to explain the consubstantiality of Father and Son and the role of the Son as the true image of the Father. For the Acts of Nicaea: ACO² 3, II, 396; ACO² 3, III, 683, 748; Price, *The Acts*, 312, 483, 520.

14 See for instance: Iohannes von Damaskos, *Die Schriften*, III, *Contra imaginum caluniatores orationes tres*, III, 86, 114, 122, 123, 127, ed. B. Kotter [Patristische Texte und Studien 17] (Berlin 1975) 179, 191, 193, 194, 195; Nicephorus, *Antirrhetici tres adversus Constantinum Copronymum*, I, 30; III, 21-4, in J.-P. Migne [PG 100] (Paris 1865), 280, 408-14 (thereafter Nicephorus, *Antirrhetici*).

15 L. Brubaker, 'Perception and conception: art, theory and culture in ninth-century Byzantium', *Word & Image* 5.1 (1989) 19-32, esp. 25.

16 ACO² 3, I, 143-145, 151; ACO² 3, II, 394, 396-401; Price, *The Acts*, 166-7, 311-14. Later Church Fathers are named as champions of the right faith, which included the veneration of sacred images (ACO² 3, III, 708-10).

17 Iohannes von Damaskos, *Die Schriften*, III, *Contra imaginum caluniatores orationes tres*, III, 48, 56, 58, 86, 98, 103, 114, ed. Kotter, 147, 169, 179, 187, 188, 191; Nicephorus, *Apologeticus*, in J.-P. Migne [PG 100] (Paris 1865), 533-831. For the florilegium of Nicetas of Medicion (d. 824): A. Alexakis, 'A florilegium in the

sources, the passages reinforced iconophile arguments with the venerable support of the Fathers, affirming the value of icon veneration as an established custom and widely accepted practice¹⁸ – just as was veneration of the imperial image. The writings of the Fathers also countered the iconoclastic appeal to apostolic tradition by linking the apostolic and patristic traditions to claim that the practice of icon veneration had originated in the time of the Apostles, continued through the time of the Fathers, and should be recognized still by the Council of 787.¹⁹ As another passage from Nicaea II explains, devout Christians receive, kiss, and embrace the holy icons in accordance with established church practice.²⁰

Furthermore, it should be remembered that statues, mosaics, and paintings of emperors pervaded Constantinople during this time: thus, the textual sources did not draw on abstract concepts when they refer to the imperial icon but were based on lived reality. For instance, although scholars envisage the end of three-dimensional statuary around the seventh century,²¹ we know that in the eighth and ninth century the capital of the empire was still adorned with imperial statues, some of which were repositories of magical powers, while others were known as portraits of ancient emperors.²² A statue of Justinian II (r. 685-95; 705-11) was displayed on a column at St Anna in the Deuteron area.²³ Scholars doubt that the emperor represented was actually Justinian II,²⁴ but more importantly the people believed that it was his statue. Along with

Life of Nicetas of Medicon and a letter of Theodore of Studios', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 48 (1994) 179–97, esp. 185-91. According to Alexakis, this florilegium is the last of a series starting with that of the Roman Synod of 731. He also suggests that the Acts of Nicaea II used both a florilegium dating to 770 and texts by John of Damascus.

18 On the ubiquitous appeal to tradition: L. Brubaker, 'In the beginning was the Word: art and Orthodoxy at the Councils of Trullo (692) and Nicaea II (787)', in A. Casiday and A. Louth (eds.), *Byzantine Orthodoxies. Papers from the Thirty-sixth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Durham, 23–25 March 2002* (London 2006) 95-101, esp. 96-7.

19 ACO² 3, II, 590; see also: ACO² 3, I, 6, 194-200; Price, *The Acts*, 86, 184-6, 358, 418.

20 ACO² 3, II, 486; Price, *The Acts*, 418.

21 B. Anderson, 'The disappearing imperial statue: toward a social approach', in T.M. Kristensen and L. Stirling (eds.), *The Afterlife of Greek and Roman Sculpture: Late Antique responses and practices* (Ann Arbor 2016) 290–309; P. Liverani, 'The sunset of 3D', in the same volume, 310–29, esp. 312-15; B. Ward-Perkins, 'The end of the statue habit, AD 284-620', in R.R.R. Smith and B. Ward-Perkins (eds.), *The Last Statues of Antiquity* (Oxford 2016) 295–306; and most recently P. Chatterjee, *Between the Pagan Past and Christian Present in Byzantine Visual Culture. Statues in Constantinople, 4th-13th centuries CE* (Cambridge 2022) 16-25, 51-78.

22 A. Cameron and J. Herrin (eds.), *Constantinople in the Early Eighth Century: The Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* (Leiden 1984); A. Berger (ed.), *Accounts of Medieval Constantinople: the Patria* (Washington DC).

23 *Patria Constantinopouleos*, III, 79, ed. A. Berger, 178.

24 Scholars agree that similar statues probably represented earlier emperors: B. Anderson, 'Classified knowledge: the epistemology of statuary in the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 35 (2011) 1–19, esp. 8-9.

paintings and mosaics of emperors set up in public spaces,²⁵ Constantinople was pervaded by imperial imagery well into the eighth and early ninth centuries. If we read the several references to the imperial image found both in patristic and iconophile literature in connection to the urban landscape of the capital, reconstructing the context in which the imperial images appeared in a visual perspective, then it is clear that the imperial portrait was not just a literary metaphor drawn from ancient texts and used to legitimize the veneration of religious icons but an object known in everyday life, the power of which was widely and vividly felt.

The frequent appeal to the imperial icon in literature of the iconoclastic period also attests that imperial portraits were common objects of veneration and still manufactured even during this period – otherwise no one would have understood the repeated mentions found in iconophile writings. Although we do not have actual evidence for this typology of portrait from the eighth and ninth centuries,²⁶ the constant reference to it in the discourse on icon veneration bears testimony to its persistence in unbroken continuity with the past. As will be demonstrated, even portraits of iconoclastic emperors were still made and, though subtly exorcized from the larger context of imperial icons and their veneration, their use continued undisputed during their rule.

Veneration of the imperial image: practice and meaning

Byzantine law codes of the fifth, sixth, and ninth century clarify how imperial portraits had to be treated and in doing so attest to their diffusion and unique value in Byzantine society. The law required citizens to honour the imperial image and demanded punishment for insulting behaviour toward the representation of the emperor. The Codes of Theodosius and of Justinian further dictate how to treat the imperial image: in cases where public spaces needed repair, imperial images were to be removed with due reverence (*cum reverentia*) and later restored to their places.²⁷ Likewise, pictures of actors or charioteers were not allowed to be set up in porticoes or in public spaces that were ‘consecrated to imperial images’;²⁸ people could seek asylum

25 As late as the thirteenth century Nicetas Choniates refers to imperial portraits found on walls and panels on the occasion of the deposition of Andronikos I Comnenos in 1185 (Nicetae Choniatae *Historia*, XI, 8, 13 ed. J.-L. van Dieten [CFHB 11] (Berlin 1975) 332-3).

26 However written sources mention new monumental imperial portraits: for instance, Constantine VI and his mother Irene had their image depicted in the church of the *Zoodochos Pegé* (*De sacri aedibus Deiparae ad Fontem*, in *Acta Sanctorum. Novembris*, ed. C. De Smedt, 3 vols. (Brussels 1900), III, 880C; tr. in C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453. Sources and documents* (Englewood Cliffs 1972) 155.

27 *Codex Theodosianus*, XV, 1, 44 (thereafter *CTh*) (law issued on 27 June 406); tr. in C. Parr, *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions* (Princeton 1952) 428; *Codex Justinianus*, VIII, 11, 16 (thereafter *CJ*), ed. F.H. Blume, *The Codex of Justinian: a new annotated translation, with parallel Latin and Greek text*, 3 vols. (Cambridge 2016) III, 2062-3.

28 *In quibus nostrae solent imagines consecrari: CTh*, XV, 7, 12 (law issued on June 29, 394), with translation and commentary in Parr, *The Theodosian Code*, 435; *CJ*, XI, 41, 4, ed. Blume, *The Codex of Justinian*, III, 2712-13.

at imperial statues;²⁹ no absolution was given to ‘the skilled worker who, by copying the sacred imperial features and thus assailing the divine countenance, has sacrilegiously coined their venerable images’.³⁰ Although the latter passage refers to the illicit minting of coins, it implies that imperial images on coinage were still considered sacred, venerable portraits, and that the very act of copying them was sacrilegious. The ninth-century *Basilica* contains several chapters devoted to the ruler’s image and includes description of the punishment that should be given to those who dishonour or damage imperial icons.³¹ However, a law issued in 425 also warned against excess in worship, adding that this should be reserved only to God.³²

After the fourth century, the imperial cult was much more nuanced, stripped of overt pagan acts, and yet present in certain acts of reverence performed both to the emperor and his image.³³ As we know from various sources, participants in imperial audiences were to bow in *proskynesis* in front of the emperor.³⁴ Corippus, in his sixth-century poem celebrating Justin II, and Theophilact Symocatta in the seventh century both describe ceremonies and acts of honour performed in front of the emperor, including *proskynesis*.³⁵ As it appears in the tenth-century *De Cerimoniis*, this act was due by

29 *CTh*, IX, 44 (law issued on July 6, 386), with tr. and commentary in Parr, *The Theodosian Code*, 264; *CJ*, I, 25, 1, ed. Blume, *The Codex of Justinian*, I, 312-13.

30 *Qui sacri oris imitator et divinorum vultuum adpetitor venerabiles formas sacrilegio eruditus impressit*: *CTh*, IX, 38, 6 (law issued on July 21, 381), tr. and commentary in Parr, *The Theodosian Code*, 253-4. As this law clarifies, the same applies to the one who acts against the ‘imperial Majesty’. In the corresponding passage the *Codex Justinianus* addresses the ‘counterfeiter and the violator of coinage’ (*adulterator violatorque monetae*) (*CJ*, I, 4, 3, ed. Blume, *The Codex of Justinian*, I, 150-1). Another law mentions explicitly coins with the ‘Emperor’s face’: the presence of the imperial image as a repository of veneration (*nostri vultus ac veneratio*) confirms the coin’s value (*CTh*, IX, 22, 1, law issued on July 26, 317, tr. and commentary in Parr, *The Theodosian Code*, 244; *CJ*, XI, 11, 1, ed. Blume, *The Codex of Justinian*, III, 2678-9).

31 *Basilica*, LVIII, 12, 16 and 21; LX, 36, 6-7; LX, 51, 26, ed. H.J. Scheltema, N. van der Wal, *Basilicorum libri LX. Series A*, 8 vols. (Groningen 1955-88), VII, 2673, 2674 and VIII, 2966, 3078-9.

32 *Excedens cultura hominum dignitatem superno numini reservetur*: *CTh*, XV, 4, 1 (law issued on May 5, 425), tr. and commentary in Parr, *The Theodosian Code*, 432; *CJ*, I, 24, 2, ed. Blume, *The Codex of Justinian*, I, 310-11.

33 For the veneration of the ruler’s portrait: E. Kitzinger, ‘The cult of images in the age before Iconoclasm’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954) 83-150; H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: a history of the image before the era of art* (Chicago 1994) 102-14; see also K. Marsengill, ‘The visualization of the imperial cult in late antique Constantinople’, in L.M. Jefferson and R.M. Jensen (eds.), *The Art of Empire: Christian art in its imperial context* (Augsburg 2015) 271-306.

34 They are to approach the emperor with covered hands (M. McCormick ‘Audience’, in A.P. Kazhdan (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3 vols. (Oxford 1991) I, 231-2). For *proskynesis* as an extreme act of self-submission: R. Guiland, *Recherches sur les institutions byzantines* (Berlin 1967) I, 144-50; A. Cutler, *Transfigurations. Studies in the dynamics of Byzantine iconography* (University Park PA 1975) 53-91.

35 Corippus, *In laudem Iustini Augusti Minoris*, I, 157, ed. A. Cameron (London 1976), 41; Theophylacti Symocattae *Historiae*, I, 10, 9, ed. C. De Boor and P. Wirth (Stuttgart 1972), 58.

those who approached the sovereign.³⁶ Concerning the honours given to images of emperors, Constantine I provides a precedent. On the annual anniversary of the foundation of Constantinople, the gilded statue of Constantine was escorted in procession by soldiers holding candles.³⁷ Scholars believe that imperial statuary later gave way to two-dimensional portraiture, which had to be given analogous reverence. In 602 the icon of emperors Phocas (r. 602-10) and Leontia – probably a panel painting – was received in Rome with acclamations and displayed in the Lateran and on the Palatine.³⁸ The Acts of Nicaea II records that wreathed imperial portraits (*laurata*) were received with candles and incense in the cities of the empire.³⁹ In the tenth century, the emperor and the patriarch honoured an icon of Basil I (r. 867-86) with prayers and candles on the anniversary of the dedication of the *Nea Ecclesia*.⁴⁰ Thus, practices previously linked to the Roman imperial cult survived well through Late Antiquity and even into later centuries, across the iconoclastic period. As Katherine Marsengill demonstrates, from the sixth century onwards, major changes included a progressive Christianization not so much in the acts of veneration directed toward the emperor, but of the emperor himself; in other words, in the Christian ideology of the empire, the *basileus* became an intermediary between God and human beings, something that was reflected in the use of the imperial portrait in religious contexts.⁴¹ In order to determine the meaning of the veneration of the imperial image and its unchanged role in the Byzantine mentality during Iconoclasm – and at least until the ninth century when the theology of image veneration devised in the Second Council of Nicaea was proclaimed and adopted by the Orthodox Church – we should now look at the terminology used in written texts in relation to the veneration of imperial and saintly images and compare the two.

36 Innumerable are the passages of the *De Cerimoniis* describing *proskynesis* before the emperor. It is worth noticing that in the ninth century Patriarch Nicephorus blames Constantine V for forbidding *proskynesis* before the holy icons but not before the emperor's image (Nicephorus, *Antirrhetici*, I, 27, ed. Migne, 276C).

37 Ioannis Malalae *Chronographia*, XIII.8, ed. I. Thurn [CFHB 35] (Berlin 2000) 247; *Chronicon Paschale*, Olympiad 277, AD 330, ed. L. Dindorf (Bonn 1832) 530. For a similar ceremony, see also: *Parastaseis syntomoi chronikai*, 5, 38 and 56, in Cameron and Herrin, *Constantinople in the Early Eighth Century*, 60-1, 100-3, 130-1, 173-4, 215-18, 242-5. In the fifth century Philostorgius reports the practice of lighting candles and incense in front of Constantine's statue on the column of his *forum*: Philostorgius, *Kirchengeschichte*, II, 17, ed. J. Bidez [GCS] (Berlin 1981) 28.

38 Gregorius Magnus, *Registrum epistularum, Appendix*, ed. D. Norberg [CPL 1714; CC SL 140A] (Turnhout 1982) 1101. The *De Cerimoniis* describes that in the fifth century images of emperors Anthemios and Leo were displayed in Constantinople and then copied and sent to the cities of the empire (Constantin VII Porphyrogènetè, *Le livre des cérémonies*, I, 96 (I, 87), ed. G. Dagron and B. Flusin, 5 vols. [CFHB 52/1-5] (Paris 2020), II, 382-5).

39 ACO² 3, I, 58; Price, *The Acts*, 114.

40 Ἀπποῦσι κηροῦς εἰς τὴν εἰκόνα Βασιλείου (Constantin VII Porphyrogènetè, *Le livre des cérémonies*, I, 28 (I, 19), ed. Dagron and Flusin, I, 214-15); tr.: 'They light candles before Basil's icon'.

41 Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons*, 142-58.

In written sources, as well as in iconophile writings, the word used for the act of honouring the emperor is the same as that for the act performed in front of the imperial image: *proskynesis*. The verbs referring to the action – *proskyneō* (προσκυνέω) and *timaō* (τιμάω) – are also the same, whether in reference to imperial images or the emperor himself. While *προσκυνέω* implies self-submission and is linked to the performative act of prostration that demonstrates one's obeisance, *τιμάω* – and the corresponding word *time* (τιμή) – expresses the honour given to superiors.⁴² Both recur in the context of honouring either the emperor or the saints – and imperial or saintly images – and are found in official and prominent iconophile sources such as the Acts of Nicaea II. However, the *Horos* qualifies the character of these acts: while true worship (*λατρεία*) may be addressed only to God, the Theotokos, the angels and saints, only a 'loving and honourable *proskynesis*' (*ἀσπασμὸς καὶ τιμητικὴ προσκύνησις*) shall be rendered to their images, as the honours rendered to the image – including offerings of incense and lights – will pass over to the prototype.⁴³ As Richard Price underlines, 'true worship' (*λατρεία*) lacks defined acts⁴⁴ and involves intimate and profound faith. Patriarch Nicephorus defines the latter as the highest form of veneration, performed in spirit, while *proskynesis* before sovereigns and superiors indicates the recognition of their status and dignity.⁴⁵ Therefore, while *proskynesis* implies acts that visualize reverence and honour and, as such, is to be performed before the emperor or consecrated objects, 'true worship' is a kind of intimate veneration that is to be given to God alone.⁴⁶

While in practice acts of reverence towards the imperial image did not differ from those performed towards holy icons – from antiquity, *proskynesis* was the major and outstanding demonstration of honour – the churchmen at Nicaea II clarify that the nature of the acts and the motivations behind the performance of due honours were substantially different. Honouring the emperor showed respect and reverence akin to that for superiors or older relatives. Biblical figures performed *proskynesis* as an expression of salutation and honour, showing deference through their prostration, without considering as God the person who or the object which received honours.⁴⁷ Honouring the imperial image meant to display one's loyalty and respect to the emperor: in the case of a good king who made himself a precious crown, by

42 See the entries *προσκύν-έω* and *τιμάω* in *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, <https://stephanus-tlg-uci-edu> (accessed 10.6.2023); *Lexikon zur byzantinischen Gräzität*, <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lbg/> (accessed 10.6.2023); G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford 1961) 1174-6.

43 ACO² 3, III, 826; Price, *The Acts*, 564-5. Price underlines that the expression *ἀσπασμὸς καὶ τιμητικὴ προσκύνησις* implies the performative acts of kissing and prostration.

44 Price, *The Acts*, 565 n. 58. John of Damascus devotes several chapters to the various degrees of veneration, but does not clarify if each was associated with a distinct act (Iohannes von Damaskos, *Die Schriften*, III, *Contra imaginum caluniatores orationes tres*, III, 27-40, ed. Kotter, 135-41).

45 Nicephorus, *Antirrhetici*, III, 10, ed. Migne, 392.

46 This is clarified in ACO² 3, III, 628 and 728; Price, *The Acts*, 452, 508.

47 So Jacob before the Pharaoh, for example (ACO² 3, II, 356; Price, *The Acts*, 294).

performing *proskynesis* before the crown, people manifested their tribute and deference towards the king himself and his deeds.⁴⁸ Therefore, objects related to the emperor, such as the crown or the purple, which marked the person wearing them as the emperor while visually declaring his authority, were to be given due honours – just like his portrait.

As concerns holy images, the *Horos* of the Council prescribes that the ‘venerable and holy icons’ in painting, mosaic, or any other media had to be received with honours (performing *proskynesis*) and kissed, lighting candles, lamps, and incense.⁴⁹ The Acts explain the demonstrations of honour towards holy images with various arguments: apart from the usual appeal to the tradition of the Church and the Fathers,⁵⁰ there was above all the need for devotion and love towards the saints, to receive blessings from them. Several passages underline that image-veneration implied a deep involvement of the personal sphere, demonstrating ‘desire and longing to ascend to their archetypes’.⁵¹ Accordingly, holy icons were to be venerated ‘in remembrance and commemoration and moved by the love for the archetype’.⁵² The kissing of icons was equated to the demonstration of love towards a beloved one: humans kiss the garments of lost loved ones and, as Tarasios emphasizes, embrace and kiss dear friends, a manifestation of affection and love.⁵³ So, too, Christians kiss holy images as if they were ‘holding Christ or the martyrs in their souls’.⁵⁴ The kiss (*ἄσπασμός*) and the *proskynesis* (*τιμητικὴ προσκύνησις*) expressed salutation and reverence and were believed to be major expressions of devotion.⁵⁵ Offerings of lights and incense were an ancient practice; the light emanating from candles and lamps was believed to be the visual manifestation of Divine enlightenment while the incense’s fragrance and smoke made sensible the pure inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ And, as the Acts of Nicaea II clearly state, believers were moved to receive blessings.⁵⁷ The motivations behind the acts of honour towards holy icons may be summarized as acts of personal affection and devotion which, in turn, involved sanctification, in a logic of gift-giving.⁵⁸ The same acts performed

48 ACO² 3, II, 360; Price, *The Acts*, 296.

49 ACO² 3, III, 826; Price, *The Acts*, 564-5.

50 ACO² 3, II, 486; ACO² 3, II, 596-98; Price, *The Acts*, 358, 421-3.

51 Tr. in Price, *The Acts*, 490. Greek text: πόθῳ καὶ στοργῇ κινούμενοι πρὸς τὴν τῶν πρωτοτύπων (ACO² 3, III, 694-96).

52 Tr. in Price, *The Acts*, 452. Greek text: εἰς ἀνάμνησιν καὶ ὑπόμνησιν καὶ πόθῳ διακεῖμενοι πρὸς τὰ αὐτῶν πρωτότυπα (ACO² 3, III, 628). See also: ACO² 3, III, 688, 788, 826; Price, *The Acts*, 486, 544, 565.

53 ACO² 3, II, 354; ACO² 3, III, 862-64; Price, *The Acts*, 294, 583.

54 The text reads: τῇ ψυχῇ αὐτὸν τὸν Χριστὸν [...] ἢ τὸν μάρτυρα αὐτοῦ κατέχειν (ACO² 3, II, 354); tr.: ‘holding Christ or the martyrs in our souls’ (Price, *The Acts*, 293).

55 ACO² 3, III, 788; Price, *The Acts*, 544. See also: ACO² 3, II, 342; Price, *The Acts*, 288-9.

56 This is well explained in a letter by Patriarch Germanos to Thomas bishop of Claudiopolis which was quoted in the Acts (ACO² 3, II, 474; Price, *The Acts*, 352).

57 ACO² 3, III, 680, 726-8, 960; Price, *The Acts*, 482, 508, 648.

58 Greek text: καὶ τῷ ἀγίῳ ἢ τιμῇ τῆς ἀγιότητος οὐκ ἄλλως φυλάττεται ἢ διὰ τῆς ἡμῶν σχετικῆς προσκυνήσεως (ACO² 3, III, 726-8); tr.: ‘The only way to bestow honours due to holiness is through relational veneration’ (Price, *The Acts*, 508).

towards the emperor and his image were demonstrations of respect and obeisance, explicit recognitions of the role of the emperor as the head of the state and, as we will see, of the Christian hierarchy of the empire. Indeed, the Acts of Nicaea II show that, although in theory veneration towards holy icons and imperial images was moved by different impulses, in practice it was performed in the same way, through ceremonial acts that had been typical of the imperial veneration since antiquity and continued through the centuries.

From the image to the emperor: semiotic and visual role of the imperial icon

Although, as we have seen, imperial portraits and holy icons were treated in similar fashion, the status of the imperial icon in Byzantine visuality and its semiotic value was of a distinctive kind. As stated by Church Fathers and repeated at Nicaea II, the icon of the emperor possessed his figure and likeness.⁵⁹ The icon of the emperor was intended to reveal his individual likeness, sufficient to be recognizable – if sometimes further aided by an inscription – as well as the character and traits of his imperial majesty. The image's relative degree of likeness to the emperor and the inclusion in his portrayal of the insignia of power allowed the viewer to recognize the emperor in it. Form and likeness were the distinctive features through which from the present dimension of recognition the observer could reach the person represented – the 'archetype' or 'prototype' of patristic and Nicene sources, terms with a clear Platonic and Neoplatonic provenance – in the present of another place. Whether the imperial representation was a painted panel, a fresco, a mosaic, or a statue, the ruler became present in his icon even when he was elsewhere: imperial images *re-presented* him before the beholder and at the same time *presentified* him in his authority and power.⁶⁰ As Brubaker emphasizes, 're-present' in the sense of making someone present again,⁶¹ bringing him before the viewer, here and now, is more appropriate to describe the way the imperial icon acted in the Byzantine conceptual and visual system. Thus, according to Byzantine image theory, the εἰκὼν τοῦ βασιλέως is an icon,⁶² not only in the broad sense of a portrait reproduced in various media, but also in a semiotic sense: as a sign that refers to itself, just as the representation of the emperor refers to his person.⁶³ In this way the ruler's authority and power was made present through his image and alive through the honours that were to be bestowed upon him.

However, as I have explained elsewhere, the imperial icon is also a symbol. In fact, it visualized the highest figure of the earthly cosmos and signified the presence of the

59 For a thorough discussion of the implications of this concept: Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons*, 66-104.

60 Here, *presentify* implies that the subject of the image becomes a presence. Opposite to this is the term as it is used in the image theory of the Western Middle Ages as theorized by Jérôme Baschet among others, where the verb implies that the subject of the image becomes an object (J. Baschet, *L'iconographie médiévale* (Paris 2008) 25-64; J.-P. Vernant, 'Figuration et image', *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 5.1-2 (1990) 225-38).

61 L. Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* (London 2012) 109.

62 For a different point of view: Eastmond, 'Between icon and idol'.

63 On this point: M.C. Carile, 'Imperial icons in Late Antiquity and Byzantium. The iconic image of the emperor between representation and presence', *Ikon* 9 (2016) 75-98.

sacred Eastern Roman imperial power, the holy imperial *basileia*, beyond the person of the ruler that was the man who represented that power.⁶⁴ Across the centuries, the icon of the *basileus* could be more or less stereotyped and non-naturalistic.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, in the imperial portrait were the insignia of power that allowed the recognition of the *basileus*: crown, purple, sceptre, *loros*. These attributes qualified the emperor immediately; they activated the direct recognition of his image, regardless of the presence or absence of inscriptions. This is clearly stated in the passage from Dorotheus cited above: the imperial icon includes ‘the imperial robes, so that anyone seeing the icon acknowledges the emperor’s own countenance and thinks to see almost the emperor himself, the very model-archetype’.⁶⁶ Moreover, the insignia manifested the imperial power as visible signs of *basileia*.⁶⁷ In this sense, the icon of the emperor was also a symbol of the institution which, in the ontology of the Byzantine state, existed by God’s will and was legitimized by its Christian character.⁶⁸ Indeed, it appears that in the icon of the Byzantine emperor the limits between the representation of the ruler as a personal portrait (the iconic value of the image) and as a symbol of the state (its symbolic value) were blurred. The imperial image was both icon and symbol.

The icon of the emperor had the function to make him present and thus played an important role in public space. It had to be displayed in public places such as courts, squares, and theatres where his image stood in for the absent emperor.⁶⁹ This is made

64 Following Kantorowicz’s theory of the king’s two bodies, a few scholars claim that imperial icons exhibited the emperor’s public body (Eastmond, ‘Between icon and idol’ and Studer-Karlen, ‘The emperor’s image’). However, according to the written sources analysed above, in Byzantium the imperial icon possessed the form and figure (μορφή και τὸ εἶδος), and indeed the countenance (χαρακτήρ) of the emperor, thus it can be excluded that it showed only his public image.

65 Grabar, *L’empereur dans l’art byzantin*; F.A. Bauer, *Stadt, Platz und Denkmal in der Spätantike: Untersuchungen zur Ausstattung des öffentlichen Raums in den spätantiken Städten Rom, Konstantinopel und Ephesos* (Mainz 1996) 339-49; Dagron, *Décrire et peindre*, 135-147; Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons*, 142-58. However, for several emperors the only image survived is on coins. This was often rather stereotyped except for the periods between the reigns of Phocas (r. 602-10) and Tiberius III (r. 698-705) and of Romanos Lekapenos (r. 920-44) and Constantine X Doukas (r. 1059-67) (P. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*, II, *Phocas to Theodosius III, 602–717* (Washington DC 1968) 88-94).

66 Σπουδαῖοι πάσας τὰς ἐσθῆτας τοῦ βασιλέως, καθὼς ἐνδέχεται, ἐνθεῖναι τῇ εἰκόνι, ἵνα βλέπῃ τις τὴν εἰκόνα περιέχουσαν ὅλον τὸν βασιλικὸν χαρακτήρα καὶ νομίζῃ ὅτι σχεδὸν αὐτὸν τὸν βασιλέα βλέπει, αὐτὸ τὸ ἀρχέτυπον (Dorothee de Gaze, *Oeuvres spirituelles*, XVI, 171, ed. Regnault and de Préville, 468-9).

67 Carile, ‘Imperial Icons’.

68 For the divine character of the *basileia*: S. Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy* (Cambridge 1977); Dagron, *Emperor and Priest*; A. Carile, ‘Il potere imperiale: imperatore e corte da Giustiniano ai macedoni’, in *Le corti nell’alto medioevo. LXII Settimana di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studio sull’Alto Medioevo* (Spoleto, 24-29 aprile 2014) (Spoleto 2015) 25–94.

69 Iohannes von Damaskos, *Die Schriften*, III, *Contra imaginum caluniatores orationes tres*, III, 123, ed. Kotter, 194. This passage is originally found in Severianus of Gabala: Severianus Gabalensis, *In mundi creatione*, VI, 5, ed. J.P. Migne [PG 56], 489-90.

clear in the visual evidence: the imperial likeness appeared on emblems of delegated power, on official dresses, and in institutional settings, such as courts. The imperial effigy is exhibited on an altar mensa with the insignia of the praetorian prefect of Illyricum in the *Notitia Dignitatum*;⁷⁰ (Fig. 3) on the sceptre held by consul Anastasius and on Aerobindus' *trabea consularis* on their diptychs;⁷¹ (Fig. 4) and on the table cloth and *labara* of Pilate's court in the *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis*.⁷² (Fig. 5) Clearly, here it had the power to legitimize offices, officials, and venues; visually, it made the state present in the figure of the emperor.

However, as stated in John of Damascus' writings and in the acts of Nicaea II, when the emperor was absent one should venerate his image, but when he was present, it would have made no sense to ignore the original and venerate his icon.⁷³ Similarly, the anonymous fourth-century author known as the Ambrosiaster mentions that in the presence of the emperor his images lost their authority.⁷⁴ We see that the imperial icon effectively expressed a presence, that of the state. Therefore, the effigy of the emperor acted as an extension of his body, making his authority present and manifesting the *basileia* when he was not present. And everything that was connected to the emperor appears to have functioned as a bearer of his power and sacredness. Already in the fifth century, the *Codex Theodosianus* denotes as *sacred* (*sacer* or *sacrum*) the emperor, the purple, and the imperial palace. In eighth- and ninth-century written sources on icon veneration, the imperial purple is used as a frequent metaphor for the emperor and the imperial office,⁷⁵ while the imperial seal or coin functioned as an imperial portrait. For instance, a well-known passage from the *Life of St. Stephen the Younger* shows that dishonouring the effigy of the emperor on a coin meant to dishonour the emperor himself.⁷⁶ And Theophanes the Confessor notes the common

70 See C. Neira Faleiro, *'Notitia dignitatum'*. *Nueva edición crítica y comentario histórico* (Madrid 2005).

71 R. Delbrueck, *Die Consulardiptychen und verwandte Denkmäler* (Berlin 1929), 123-37, 196-205 n. 9-15, 18-22; W.F. Vollbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der spätantike und des frühen mittelalters* (Mainz 1976), 32-4, 35-7, n. 8-14, 17-22; C. Olovsson, *The Consular Image. An iconological study of the Consular Diptychs* (Oxford 2005) 38-44, 47-55.

72 Rossano Calabro, Museo Diocesano, *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis*, fol. 8^r.

73 Quoting Athanasius: Iohannes von Damaskos, *Die Schriften*, III, *Contra imaginum caluniatores orationes tres*, III, 127, ed. Kotter, 195; ACO² 3, II, 374.

74 Ambrosiaster, *Ad Colossenses*, II.16-17, ed. H. J. Vogels [CPL 184 f (M)] (Turnhout 2010) 188.

75 ACO² 3, II, 352; with discussion on the authenticity of this passage: Price, *The Acts*, 293, 242-4. The Acts add that, in the same way, when a Christian venerates the cross he does not venerate the wood, but Christ who was crucified on it.

76 Stephanus Diaconus, *Vita Stephani Iunioris*, LV, ed. M.-F. Auzépy, *La vie d'Etienne le jeune par Etienne le diacre* (Aldershot 1997), 156-7, 254-5. This belief is found again in an hagiographical text of the eleventh century, which affirms that 'dishonouring the imperial portrait was not the same as dishonouring the image of a simple person' (Οὐτε μὴν εἰκόνα βασιλικὴν καὶ ἰδιωτικὴν ἀτιμάσαι) (*Vita S. Auxentii*, XVIII, 12, ed. F. Halkin, A.-J. Festugière, 'Vie de S. Auxence (BHG 203b)', in *Dix textes inédits tirés du ménologe impérial de Koutloumous* [Cahiers d'Orientalisme 8] (Geneva 1984), 66-7).

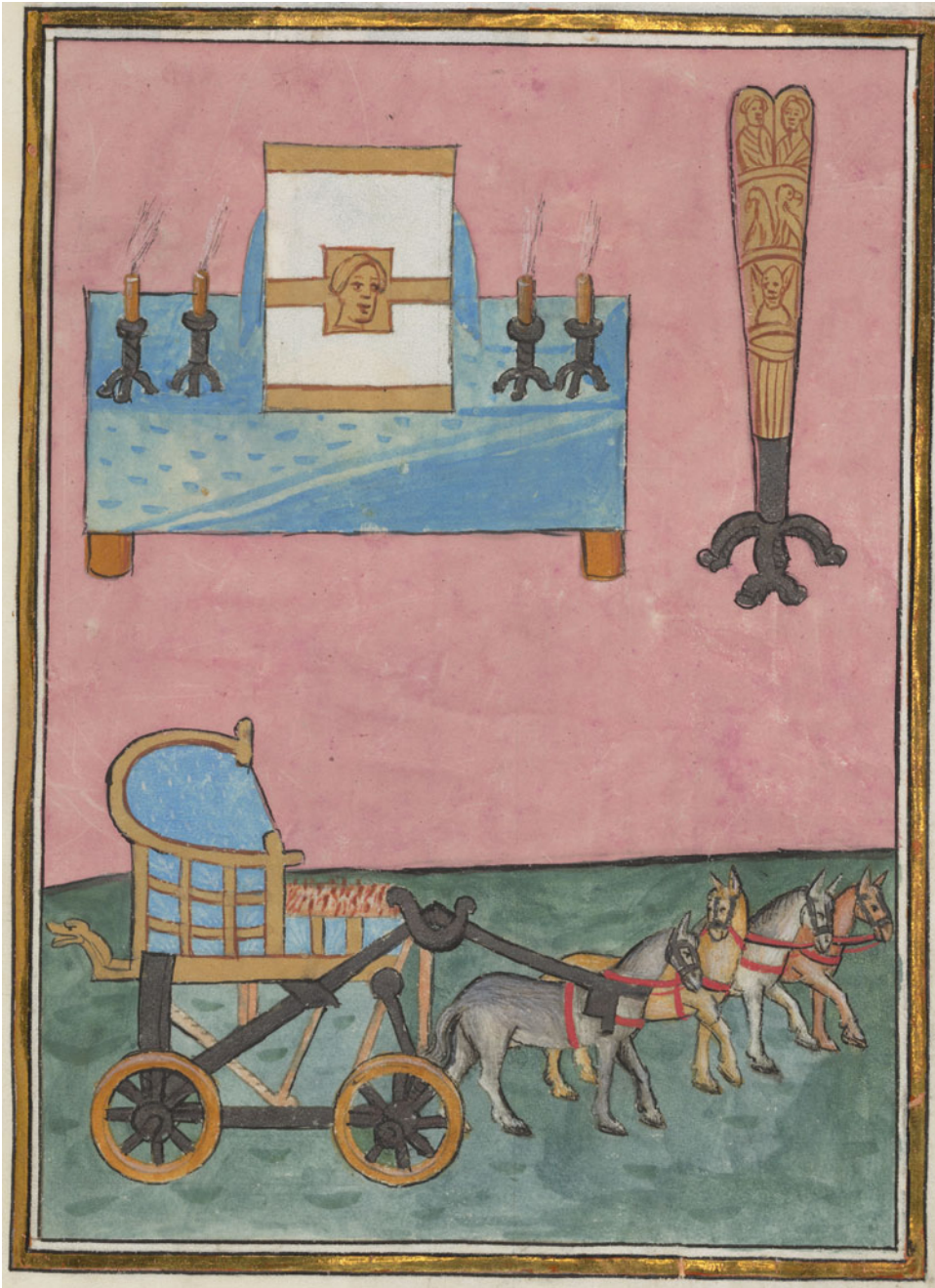


Fig. 3 Insignia of the Praetorian Prefect per Illyricum, *Notitia Dignitatum*, ca. 1436 (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Canon. Misc. 378, fol. 90r; Photo: © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford; Terms of use: [CC-BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)).



Fig. 4 Diptych of Areobindus, Constantinople, 506 (Paris, Musée de Cluny, inv. no. CL13135; photo: Françoise Foliot, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)).



Fig. 5 Pilate's court, *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis*, 6th century (Rossano Calabro, Museo Diocesano, *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis*, fol. 8^f; photo in the public domain, Wikimedia Commons).

practice of kissing the imperial seal which bore the emperor's bust.⁷⁷ In the Acts of Nicaea II the imperial purple robe and seal were to be honoured as if they were the emperor himself.⁷⁸ A fourth-century passage attributed to Ambrose expresses the same concept in

77 Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, a. 571/2, ed. C. de Boor, 2nd edn (Hildesheim 1963), I, 244-5; tr. in C. Mango, R. Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284-813* (Oxford 1997) 361.

78 ACO² 3, I, 143; ACO² 3, II, 352; ACO² 3, III, 738; Price, *The Acts*, 166, 293, 515.

reference to a letter written by Theodosius, which the bishop put on display on the altar during the liturgy making the emperor present.⁷⁹ As confirmed by John of Damascus,⁸⁰ all these elements were emanations of the reigning ruler in office – the seal and the letter contained his signature, title, or words – or insignia of power that covered his body or had been in contact with it. They were considered sacred and carried the authority of the emperor, representing and manifesting the power of the holy imperial *basileia*.⁸¹ Anything connected with the emperor was considered sacred, so his palace, his seal, his letter, his image. All the more so, the imperial icon, which allowed the *basileus* to be present in the visibility of his form and figure – his sacred imperial body – by reproducing his likeness and the insignia of his office. The εἰκὼν τοῦ βασιλέως acted as a substitute for the emperor.

The emperors and their image during Iconoclasm

During the years of Iconoclasm, there seem to be only a few texts that cast the imperial icon in a negative light. The popular *Life of St. Stephen the Younger*, written in the form of a dialogue between the iconoclast emperor Leo III and the saint, decries Leo and, among other things, mentions an episode where the imperial image on a coin was dishonoured.⁸² Patriarch Nicephoros' erudite treatise against the heretics deems Constantine V the Antichrist for replacing Christ's images with his own.⁸³ Similarly, the apocryphal *Revelation* of Leo of Constantinople, whose first redaction falls within the first decade of the ninth century, accuses the impious emperor Constantine V, likened to Satan, of forcing monks to honour an image of himself represented between Christ and the Virgin⁸⁴ – something quite improbable for an emperor who was accused of destroying icons! According to Leo, monks could not adore the image of an

79 Ambrosius, *Epistulae extra collectionem traditae*, II.5, ed. M. Zelzer, *Sancti Ambrosii opera* [CSEL 82] (Wien 1982) 179 (to Theodosius, a. 394).

80 Ὡσπερ λιτὸν ἢ κογγύλη καθ' ἑαυτὴν καὶ ἡ μετὰ αὐτὴν καὶ τὸ ἐξ ἀμφοῖν ἐξυφασμένον ἰμάτιον καὶ καθ' ἑαυτὸ οὐδεμίαν ἔχει τιμὴν, ἀν δὲ βασιλεὺς τοῦτο περιίθῃται, ἐκ τῆς προσούσης τῷ ἡμφιεσμένῳ τιμῆς τῷ ἀμφιάσματι μεταδίδεται (Iohannes von Damaskos, *Die Schriften*, III, *Contra imaginum caluniatores orationes tres*, I.37, ed. Kotter, 148); tr.: 'Just as the purple dye and the silk and the garment that is woven from them simply by themselves have no honor, but if an emperor wears it, his clothing shares in the honor' (St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, tr. A. Louth (Crestwood NY 2003), 43).

81 As the Acts of Nicaea II clarify, in the religious sphere consecrated objects functioned in the same way. Among these were coffins holding relics (ACO² 3, II, 312; Price, *The Acts*, 288), the Cross, holy icons, Gospel-books, and sacred vessels. Furthermore, images and books were believed to bear the likeness of their prototypes, thus they were material expressions of the saint through art and written texts (ACO² 3, III, *Letter by Patriarch Tarasios*, 946-48; Price, *The Acts*, 640). In a cultural process that can be explained with the figure of speech of metonymy, these objects, including holy icons, were given acts of devotion because they were not only simply related to the sphere of the sacred but believed to be agents of holiness.

82 Stephanus Diaconus, *Vita Stephani Iunioris*, LV, ed. Auzépy, 156-7, 254-5.

83 Nicephorus, *Antirrhetici*, I, 27 and III, 77, ed. Migne, 276C, 517B.

84 Leo Constantinopolitanus, *De fine mundi homilia*, 9, ed. R. Maisano, *L'apocalisse apocrifa di Leone di Costantinopoli* (Naples 1975) 82-5, 156-7.

unworthy man, which suggests that the problem was not so much about honouring the imperial icon, but rather concerned honouring the image of a shameful man who had represented himself in an icon at the same level as Christ and the Virgin. Indeed, imperial icons were expected to represent a pious, virtuous, and Christian ruler of the Byzantine empire, whose idealized image appears for example in the *specula principum*.⁸⁵ Undeniably, iconophile discourse condemns iconoclast emperors as primarily responsible for *iconomachia*; nevertheless, it does not disregard imperial authority altogether and, as we have seen, uses the imperial icon as one of the major arguments to affirm the right to venerate icons. Over the long proceedings of Nicaea II, the iconoclast emperors Leo III and Constantine V are anathematized, not by naming them, but rather by indirectly addressing their claims of saving Christians from the sin of idolatry.⁸⁶ While in the *Horos* of the iconoclast Council of Hieria (754) they are praised, at Nicaea they are obliquely condemned: Christ alone rescued Christians from idolatry.⁸⁷ This perhaps confirms the common belief that emperors, even impious ones, should not be insulted.

Considering that iconoclast emperors were undoubtedly condemned, and that it was not male rulers but empresses who promoted the restoration of religious images, both in 787 and 843, it is plausible that the perception of the emperor, his role in common mentality, and the people's submission to his authority changed over the course of Iconoclasm. Indeed, while the figure of Irene is controversial as she is not necessarily depicted in a favourable light in all iconophile texts,⁸⁸ certainly the piety and religiosity of Theodora was recognized with her canonization shortly after her death. It appears that, in the years between 754 and 787, even the acclamation and address to the emperors shifted to emphasise their devotion and their defence of the Christian faith. In the passages of Hieria in 754, the iconoclast emperors Leo and Constantine are called, in a standard formula, 'divinely crowned and orthodox' (θεόστεπτοι καὶ ὀρθόδοξοι).⁸⁹ Numerous other epithets stressing their

85 For the attributes of the good emperor: R. Seager, 'Some imperial virtues in the Latin Prose Panegyrics. The demands of propaganda and the dynamics of literary composition', *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar*, 4 (1983-4) 129-65; A. Carile, 'Ricchezza e povertà negli "specula principum" bizantini dal VI al X secolo', in A. De Benedictis (ed.), *Specula principum* (Frankfurt am Main 1999) 1-20; P. Odorico, 'Les miroirs des princes à Byzance. Une lecture horizontale', in P. Odorico (ed.), *L'éducation au gouvernement et à la vie, la tradition des règles de vie de l'Antiquité au Moyen Age. Actes du colloque international de Pise (18 et 19 mars 2005)* (Paris 2009) 223-46.

86 Τοῖς λέγουσιν ὅτι πλὴν Χριστοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν ἄλλος ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῶν εἰδώλων ἀνάθεμα (ACO² 3, I, 52; ACO² 3, II, 598; ACO² 3, III, 854); 'To those who say that it was someone other than Christ our God who rescued us from idols anathema' (Price, *The Acts*, 112, 423, 577).

87 This is clear in the *Refutation* of the *Horos* of 754: ACO² 3, III, 778-82; Price, *The Acts*, 537-9.

88 S. Efthymiadis (ed.), *The Life of Patriarch Tarasios by Ignatios the Deacon (BHG 1698)* (Aldershot 1998) 37 with comment and references. For different scholarly readings: S. Runciman, 'The Empress Irene the Athenian', *Studies in Church History. Subsidia* 1 (1978) 101-18; M.T.G. Humphreys, *Law, Power and Imperial Ideology in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850* (Oxford 2015) 232-42; Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium and the Iconoclast Era*, 260-76.

89 ACO² 3, III, 608; Price, *The Acts*, 443.

piety and orthodoxy are reserved for Constantine and Irene in 787. They are ‘those who have overthrown the novel teaching that had arisen’, the ‘guardians of the faith’, ‘new Constantine and new Helena’, ‘Christ-loving’(φιλόχριστοι), ‘divinely confirmed’ (θεοκύρωτοι), ‘divinely crowned’ (θεόστεπτοι), ‘champions of the truth’, ‘most pious and orthodox, zealous, and faithful emperors’.⁹⁰ Considering that – unlike their iconoclast predecessor Constantine V – Constantine and Irene did not attend the council, this emphasis on their piety in the discourses of the ecclesiastics gathered at Nicaea II also shows the churchmen’s perception of the emperors’ role: the right and Christian emperor left the administration of theological issues to the Church alone. This is confirmed in Patriarch Nicephorus’ treatise against the iconoclasts, where he praises various Byzantine emperors from Constantine the Great to Theodosius, Justinian, and Heraclius for their faith and religious zeal. They defended orthodoxy and were staunch opponents of idolatry, as it is demonstrated by splendid churches that they built and provided with precious vessels, holy relics, and icons.⁹¹ Indeed, precisely for their piety and their respect of the Church they were true models of good emperors.

To understand the new role of the emperors after the first Iconoclasm, the most effective passage is perhaps by Patriarch Tarasios, which dates to after 792 but was added to the proceedings of Nicaea II towards the end of the ninth century.⁹² The patriarch reminds Constantine VI that his authority shines everywhere and that his dignity, along with that of his mother, Irene, is first among all. However, he is still a man and therefore limited. Although angels and the faithful have some share in God, they do so by his grace and do not share his essence. Tarasios concludes by commending the emperor to be worthy for God to exalt his kingdom.⁹³ These words echo Agapetus the Deacon’s advice to Justinian (r. 527-65): ‘In the physical substance of the body the emperor is equal to every other man, but by the power of his authority he is similar to God who governs all things [...]; although he is honoured because of his likeness to God, yet nevertheless he is bound to the semblance of mud: by this he is admonished that he is equal to all’.⁹⁴ This awareness seems even stronger after the behaviour of Constantine VI’s predecessors who had abolished sacred images. By the early tenth century, the emperor began being portrayed

90 ACO² 3, I, 18, 110, 112, 121, 164, 182, 184, 194, 198, 210, 218, 220, 222, 232, 234, 242, 280; ACO² 3, II, 282, 532, 596, 598; ACO² 3, III, 600, 794, 820, 854, 969, 894; Price, *The Acts*, 98, 140, 153, 157, 170, 178-9, 180, 184, 186, 191, 195, 205, 210, 213, 233, 259, 388, 422, 423, 438, 439, 555, 561, 577, 604, 660.

91 Nicephorus, *Antirrheticis*, III, 78-81, ed. Migne, 276C, 517B-525A.

92 ACO² 3, III, viii (for a comment on the dating), 645-6.

93 ACO² 3, III, 645-6, 649-50.

94 Τῇ μὲν οὐσίᾳ τοῦ σώματος ἴσος παντὸς ἀνθρώπου ὁ βασιλεὺς, τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ δὲ τοῦ ἀξιώματος ὁμοίος ἐστὶ τῷ ἐπὶ πάντων θεῷ [...] εἰ γὰρ καὶ εἰκόνι θεϊκῇ τετιμῆται, ἀλλὰ καὶ κόνει χοϊκῇ συμπλέκεται, δι’ ἧς ἐκδιδάσκειται τὴν πρὸς πάντας ἰσότητα (Agapetus, *Capitula admonitoria*, 21, ed. R. Riedinger, *Agapetos Diakonos. Der Fürstenspiegel für Kaiser Iustinianos* (Athens 1995) 38-9).



Fig. 6 Mosaic of Emperor Alexander (r. 912–913), Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (photo in the public domain, Wikimedia Commons).

with the *akakia*, a silk cylinder filled with earth, as represented among the insignia of Alexander (r. 912–913) in his mosaic at Hagia Sophia. (Fig. 6) But the *akakia* is already mentioned in the ninth century, when Philotheus interprets it as a sign of

‘the resurrection of our mortal nature’, stressing the idea of the continuous regeneration of the *basileia*.⁹⁵

Conclusion

In iconophile debate, the recurrent appeal to the imperial image provided the major argument to justify icon veneration. This appears in a number of different written sources, but especially in the Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea, the most authoritative text in laying the foundations for the theology of icons that was accepted and followed in Byzantium after the end of Iconoclasm in 843. The imperial image provided an easily understandable and immediate term of comparison for explaining the importance of acts of veneration towards holy icons, by virtue of the social role of images of the emperor and of their pervasive presence in the cities of the empire.

Iconophile literature, especially the acts of Nicaea, not only uses the imperial image as an illuminating metaphor but refers to other influential texts that utilized the same formulas to elucidate theological truths: the writings of Church Fathers who gave iconophile theologians the support of a solid tradition. As Brubaker writes, in Byzantium and especially between the eighth and the ninth century, tradition justifies practice.⁹⁶ So if the image of the emperor was honoured with the same ritualized acts that were addressed to holy icons, those practices should also have been perpetuated.

Although very few images of the emperors survive and, among them, there is no material evidence of imperial panel paintings, we have seen that they were represented in weights and manuscript illuminations and mentioned in texts at least from fourth to the eleventh century. This type of imperial image provided the closest parallel to saintly icon and, if the Acts of Nicaea II refer to it as did the Fathers, they were well known objects and repositories of honours so familiar to Byzantine society they could provide an immediate comparison to explain theological discourses. While certainly the Roman imperial cult changed and was mitigated in its excesses, basic acts of reverence due to the imperial icons continued to be performed through Late Antiquity and well during the iconoclastic era until at least the ninth century – the time frame of my inquiry – and, as scholars have shown, later still.⁹⁷ These acts were the same due to holy icons and could be explained only by virtue of the special role of the imperial image in Byzantine visuality and of the emperor in the ideology of the Byzantine empire. The role of the imperial icon in image theory and its semiotic value in the

95 Philotheos, *Kletorologion*, 201, 15-16, ed. N. Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles* (Paris 1972) 201. Later in the fourteenth century, Pseudo-Codinos describes it as a reminder of the mortal nature and humility of the emperor (Pseudo-Codinus, *De officiis*, ed. J. Verpeaux, *Pseudo-Kodinos, Traité des offices* (Paris 1966) 201; discussed in R. Macrides, J. A. Munitz and D. Angelov (eds.), *Pseudo-Kodinos and the Constantinopolitan Court: Offices and Ceremonies* (Farnham 2013), 138-41 and n. 160).

96 Brubaker, ‘In the beginning was the Word’.

97 Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons*, 142-58.

Byzantine system of visual communication were closely linked to the special position of the emperor in the Byzantine *taxis* (cosmic order) as a man superior to all the other men and close to the heavenly hierarchy. The impious behaviour of iconoclast emperors who substituted themselves for Christ in the attempt to extirpate idolatry undermined the very idea of the *basileia* in Byzantium. In order to restore the veneration of saintly images it was necessary to reaffirm the model of the good emperor, supporting the Church in the reestablishment of the veneration of icons.

In iconophile thought and Byzantine tradition the veneration of the imperial icon provided a precedent and a justification for the veneration of the saintly icons, but this could happen only if the emperor in charge incarnated the ideological model of the good and virtuous Byzantine emperor. And that was the emperor present through his image, an image that should be given due honour. If the imperial insignia made manifest the idea of the sacred and virtuous imperial power in Byzantium, so did the imperial icon; and this perception continued unchallenged through Iconoclasm.

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