

LEO VI AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF BYZANTINE CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Writings of an Unexpected Emperor

The Byzantine emperor Leo VI (886–912), was not a general or even a soldier, like his predecessors, but a scholar, and it was the religious education he gained under the tutelage of the patriarch Photios that was to distinguish him as an unusual ruler. This book analyses Leo's literary output, focusing on his deployment of ideological principles and religious obligations to distinguish the characteristics of the Christian *oikoumene* from the Islamic caliphate, primarily in his military manual known as the *Taktika*. It also examines in depth his 113 legislative *Novels*, with particular attention to their theological prolegomena, showing how the emperor's religious sensibilities find expression in his reshaping of the legal code to bring it into closer accord with Byzantine canon law. Meredith L. D. Riedel argues that the impact of his religious faith transformed Byzantine cultural identity and influenced his successors, establishing the Macedonian dynasty as a 'golden age' in Byzantium.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-05307-6 — Leo VI and the Transformation of Byzantine Christian Identity
Meredith L. D. Riedel
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107053076

DOI: 10.1017/9781107281967

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First published 2018

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Riedel, Meredith L. D. (Meredith Leigh Dear), 1967– author.

Title: Leo VI and the transformation of Byzantine Christian identity : writings of an unexpected emperor / Meredith L. D. Riedel, Duke University, North Carolina.

Description: First published 2013. | New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018015095 | ISBN 9781107053076 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Leo VI, Emperor of the East, 866–912. | Byzantine Empire –

History – 527–1081. | Identification (Religion) – History – To 1500. |

Identity (Psychology) – Religious aspects – Christianity.

Classification: LCC DF592.R543 2018 | DDC 949.5/02–dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018015095>

ISBN 978-1-107-05307-6 Hardback

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Foreword

Leo VI (r. 886–912), known even in his own lifetime as ‘Leo the Wise’, was indeed a highly unusual emperor. He was the son of Basil I, founder of the Macedonian imperial dynasty (or according to some the son of Michael III, whom Basil had had murdered), and the father of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, one of the best known of Byzantine emperors and a well-known sponsor of humane learning. A student of the patriarch Photios, Leo VI was himself a scholar, a writer, a lawmaker, and a homilist, but he also deposed his teacher and replaced him with his own brother despite the fact that the latter was only 19 at the time. The same Leo later became one of the most notorious of emperors for his action in marrying four times, thus provoking the so-called Tetragamy crisis. A third marriage was frowned upon in ecclesiastical law, and to marry a fourth time seemed outrageous, even more so since Leo’s fourth wife was his former mistress, Zoe Karbonopsina. Zoe had already given birth to the future Constantine VII in the Purple Chamber of the imperial palace (hence Constantine’s epithet ‘Born in the Purple’), and the marriage took place not long afterwards. When the patriarch Nicholas Mystikos indignantly opposed the emperor despite the high view of ecclesiastical law that Leo took in his own legislation, the emperor deposed him as he had Photios.

Leo VI was a complex mixture, balancing what seem to have been heartfelt religious aims with the practical exigencies of maintaining his position and continuing the succession. A substantial corpus of writing is attributed to him, including the military and strategic manual known as the *Taktika*, the law code begun under Basil I going under the title of the *Basilika*, 113 new laws known as *Novellae*, and 42 homilies or speeches, which are the subject of Meredith L. D. Riedel’s book. Not all Leo’s works have survived, but the emperor also wrote poetry, much of it consisting of hymns and religious poems, and wrote or sponsored other legal works and commissioned works by others. Other works dating from his reign include the *Kletorologion* of Philotheos, an important source for orders of

precedence and the working of the administrative system, and the *Book of the Eparch*, which sought to regulate trades and guilds. Leo was referred to as ‘Leo the Wise’ even in his lifetime, and such was his later reputation as a sage that so-called *Oracles* were also attributed to him, consisting of oracular poems and other texts in both high-style and popular Greek to which later centuries ascribed prophetic power.

The reign of Leo has had a mixed reception among modern scholars. Despite Shaun Tougher’s study of his reign, the excellent recent work of Theodora Antonopoulou on the homilies, and George Dennis and John Haldon on the *Taktika*, and the substantial amount of scholarship on Byzantine law, his works have usually been studied separately without attempting to ascertain overall themes, and in the past they have not always been greeted with appreciation by modern scholars. In contrast, Riedel, a Byzantinist teaching in a school of divinity, takes the *Taktika*, the *Novels*, and the homilies together and understands them collectively as expressions of Leo’s religious commitment and desire to communicate a religious message. This is important, since in the *Taktika* Leo reworks earlier material to the extent that others have regarded the work as a derivative exercise drawn up by a non-military emperor rather than a practical guide. But the work is full of personal comments, and when we find the ideal general to whom the work is addressed being exhorted to base everything he does on prayer and to put God first, there seems no reason to doubt that the emperor meant it. As Haldon argues in the introduction to his commentary, the frequent and apparently personal observations in the text also suggest that they derive from Leo himself. Warfare against the Arabs was certainly a major concern, even if not the work’s primary motivation, and this raises the question of how religious attitudes to warfare in Byzantium compared with the Islamic conception of holy war at a time when a greater awareness of Islam seems to be detectable in Byzantium.

Establishing direct imperial authorship is not a simple matter, any more than for the *Novels*; as with Justinian and the *Code*, there is no need to believe that Leo himself composed all the text of his laws any more than he did the whole of the *Taktika* (where there are also indications of composition in more than one stage). But again, the tone overall in the *Novels* is moral and religious, a ‘cleansing’ and pruning of earlier laws and replacing them with new laws, which Riedel argues were designed to produce a more fully Orthodox polity in the decades after the ending of iconoclasm. Both the *Taktika* and in a sense also the *Novels* are consistent with the type of advice literature identified both with Leo’s father Basil I and his son Constantine VII. It is perhaps harder to discern a consistent message in

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the body of 42 so-called homilies written in high style, which include a funeral oration for his father Basil I and range from speeches given on important occasions in the palace or other imperial settings to homilies delivered in various churches in Constantinople, but Leo was unusual for an emperor in engaging in this activity at all, let alone in leaving such a substantial corpus or one probably collected by Leo himself. Some of the homilies honour saints with a particular relevance for Leo and who were the dedicatees of churches built by his father Basil I or by himself. Taken together, the homilies suggest an emperor with a high sense of religious mission and teaching responsibility.

The intellectual and religious aims of this remarkable emperor clearly deserve more exploration than they have so far been given. Riedel sometimes enlivens her discussion with personal comments arising from her Protestant background and her experience in a divinity school. But her main argument, pursued in lively fashion through her book as a whole, gives us a Leo VI who was not only learned but also possessed of a strong desire to use his writings to convey a serious and consistent religious message.

Averil Cameron

Preface

No one comes to Byzantium by a straight road, so my intellectual journey has been one of delightful surprises, with this book as a direct result. My interest in Byzantium was prompted by a trip to the Republic of Turkey during my seminary studies. Although Turkey is a secular Muslim country, we visited many obviously Christian church buildings decorated with astonishing gold mosaics of Christos Pantokrator ('Christ the almighty') left by the citizens of a vanished Christian empire. I soon discovered the surprising existence of Byzantium, founded by Constantine the Great in 330 CE and destroyed by Mehmet the Conqueror in 1453 CE. Its people spoke a dozen languages, its territory lay across three continents, and from beginning to end its inhabitants called their home the Roman empire, embraced the Christian religion, and ruled in the language and heritage of the Greeks. What particularly piqued my curiosity was the fact – still controversial among historians – that this Christian empire lost two-thirds of its territory in less than 20 years to adherents of the new Islamic religion in the early seventh century, but survived, held its borders against continual attack, and even thrived for another 800 years before succumbing. Only graduate work at the mother-lode of Byzantine studies (also affectionately known as 'the home of lost causes'), the University of Oxford, gave me satisfying answers, while also teaching me to ask better questions. There, I was trained as a historian, and of necessity along the way studied Byzantine Greek, Classical Syriac, Russian, Classical Arabic, and modern Greek. The road was long, but the fascination with Byzantium deepened, and now, more than a decade later, that curiosity remains strong.

This book found its genesis in a tutorial in 2004 with the venerable James Howard-Johnston, who assigned an essay on Byzantine military manuals. I wrote on five, all dating to the tenth century, and in the process discovered that the oldest of these, the *Taktika* of Leo VI, had never been translated into English yet appeared to have been seminal for the development of

all the others. Their promulgation also coincided with what has come to be known as the Byzantine reconquest, the uniquely successful period of territorial expansion that distinguished the Macedonian dynasty from the previous 300 years as well as from the following 400 years. James, ever attentive to military and political history, was less interested in my analysis of the religious language in these manuals, dismissing it with a regal wave of his hand as he called it ‘that thing you do’. The tender mercies of ‘HoJo’, as he was affectionately known, included that I learn Russian ‘because one cannot become a proper Byzantinist without it’ and countless tutorials amongst the teetering stalagmites of books in his office where his twinkling humour and passion for the scholarly endeavour pushed me to learn more than I had imagined possible.

My interest in the nexus of Byzantine religious language and military thought eventually focused on the *Taktika* of Leo VI, which at that point had never been translated into English. This led to an ongoing correspondence with George Dennis, SJ, who at that time was nearing completion on the first translation of the *Taktika* into English (Washington, DC, 2010, 2nd ed. 2014). Father Dennis was generous with his time and comments as we discovered that we were on the same path of discerning the theological perspective permeating the text. It was a great joy to see the publication of his translation in the same month as the completion of my doctoral thesis, though tinged with some sadness as Father Dennis had died just a few weeks earlier. The thesis was examined by the incomparable Averil Cameron and the eminent Jonathan Shepard, both at the peak of their powers and formidably thorough on the day. I was extraordinarily happy to pass with no corrections apart from a very few typos.

Constellations of superb scholars around the world have had a hand in developing my work. Early on, at Wellesley, I learned German as well as how to conduct research in a foreign language from the elegant and engaging Thomas Hansen. At Princeton, those research skills were refined using the Hebrew language under the guidance of my master’s thesis advisor, Jacqueline Lapsley, and especially with Ray van Leeuwen’s unforgettable tutelage in the wisdom of the biblical book of Proverbs. Tom Gillespie’s course on Romans 9–11 allowed me to combine insights from the Old Testament and the New, and most notably, was where I first began reading the work of renowned biblical scholar Richard Hays, whose influence on my journey increased even more when, as Dean of Duke Divinity, he hired me to teach the history of Christianity. His welcome and encouragement since then have nurtured my scholarship and provided an extraordinary and congenial professional home.

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At Oxford, I was fortunate to learn from luminaries in the fields of history, language, theology, and Byzantine studies. From the very first week of the very first Michaelmas term, the erudite David G. K. Taylor gently encouraged a foray into Syriac language and literature leading to a brilliant postdoctoral fellowship at Oxford that significantly deepened my grasp on the historical context of Christianities indigenous to the Middle East. Greek reading classes with the inestimable Elizabeth Jeffreys, where we translated together Byzantine texts of terrifying complexity, stand out as a rite of passage. No less challenging, but certainly deeply encouraging, were Greek translation tutorials with the irrepressible and deeply learned Ida Toth. The warmth and support of the late Mark Whittow, who energetically encouraged me to pursue the literature of Leo VI, was given with characteristically impeccable timing; the unexpected loss of this man in late 2017 dealt a staggering blow to all of us who knew him. The venerable classicist Sir Fergus Millar helped hone habits of discipline and perseverance, and his kindness to me as a younger scholar cannot be overestimated. The postdoc year spent working with him was my happiest in Oxford. Canon Sarah Foot was tremendously encouraging, and I am grateful for her generosity, good advice, and personal warmth. Of all the dons at Oxford, two in particular stand out as determinative of my development as a scholar. First, Chris Wickham's pastoral care and intellectual leadership enabled me to finish well. Without his counsel and protection, dragons would have ravaged the land. My debt to him can never be repaid. Second, my doctoral supervisor, Catherine Holmes, gave me what I needed most: freedom to write what I thought and a light touch for essential corrections. Under her expert guidance, the thesis went from a series of disorganized thoughts to finished and submitted in less than two years.

Over the past six years, I have enjoyed the great good fortune to teach in a university divinity school, which has granted me space and opportunity to winkle out complexities previously unknown to me. The exploration of religious language in apparently military and political texts continues to intrigue me; this book is a direct result of that search. It represents both a narrowing and a broadening of my DPhil thesis, which examined the development of Byzantine Christian identity from the early ninth to the late tenth century. This book is focused on the writings of Leo VI alone, but includes consideration of writings from three genres: his military manual, his legislation (the 113 novels), and to a lesser degree his homilies, which are utterly unexpected compositions for a Byzantine emperor. Two chapters from the D.Phil. thesis, both on the *Taktika* itself, have been revised for inclusion here (Chapters 2 and 3). I remain pleased that John Haldon, who

read the final version of the thesis in 2010, generously confirmed that there was nothing in it with which he disagreed (at least, not at the time!). It was gratifying to see that he cited the thesis several times in his 2014 commentary on the text of the *Taktika*, in particular adopting my analysis of the structure of the text in terms of the importance of the religious vocabulary at the beginning and end of the manual. Although his work, as a commentary on the *Taktika*, had a different purpose from what I am presenting in this volume, the comprehensive scope of his scholarship has enabled me to move beyond the military manual to explore similar approaches in other literature produced by Leo VI. The other seven chapters of this book present new research, written while teaching full time on the tenure track at Duke University. The one semester of leave granted to me in the fall of 2016 enabled the production of the penultimate manuscript, and the summer of 2017 permitted me to complete Chapters 7 and 8. Numerous aspects of every chapter have been presented at national and international conferences over the past six years, and I am very grateful for the interest and conversations elicited on those occasions.

Claudia Rapp, whose excellent mentorship often focused my professional life in the right directions, invited me to present a paper at the 2014 International Society of Biblical Literature conference in Vienna on the subject ‘The Bible in Byzantium’. The ideas found in Chapter 4 on the Ideal Christian General were developed initially in that paper, titled ‘Echoes of Scripture in Byzantine Political Identity’. I am indebted to Ioannis Stouraitis for willingness to discuss this topic together during that conference and subsequent research trips to Vienna; he helped clarify my understanding and articulation of our shared approach to these texts. A volume of the collected papers from that conference, titled *The Bible in Byzantium: Text and Experience*, and edited by Claudia Rapp, Andreas Külzer, and Christian Gastgeber, is forthcoming in 2018 from Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. In Vienna, a serendipitous conversation with Theodora Antonopoulou over coffee at the Café Engländer affirmed the importance of Leo’s homilies, incurring a debt on my part for her generous attention to my questions about their significance.

In 2015, at the annual conference of the Southeastern Medieval Association, I presented some initial research on Leo’s legislation in a paper titled, ‘Leo VI and the Cleansing of the Law’, which was published in the peer-reviewed journal *Medieval Perspectives* in 2016; the fuller development of that research is presented here in Chapters 5 and 6. Additionally, some of the material from Chapter 7 on Byzantine ‘chosenness’ was presented in 2017 at the annual conference for the Byzantine Studies Association of

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North America (BSANA). Earlier versions of my thoughts in Byzantine Christian identity were enhanced by comments offered by Anthony Kaldellis at previous BSANA conferences in 2009 and 2011.

In recent years, rising interest in the role of religious language and especially the use of biblical texts in Byzantium has elicited an increasing number of conferences, articles, and monographs. The first chapter documents this literature and points to what I hope will become a sustained groundswell of academic work in this area. As a historian with theological training, my interest in Leo VI was naturally stimulated when I discovered that he was responsible for what seemed to be a virtual one-man upsurge in literature with a religious flavour, either subtle – as in his military manual – or more overt – as in his homiletical and even legislative writings. The approaches of biblical scholarship offer a particular prism for examining these historical texts, and thus I hope to integrate the insights of Byzantine and theological perspectives. Since Christianity has from the beginning been an Eastern religion, it seems to me an appropriate moment for Western scholarship to reckon more deeply with the distinctive easternness of Byzantine ideology and philosophy, and in particular their approach to the Christianness of the imperial project based in Constantinople.

Although I am not myself an Orthodox Christian, and cannot therefore analyse this faith tradition from the inside as it were, my position as a professor in a divinity school does require scholarly attentiveness to issues of religion. To my knowledge, I am the only professional Byzantinist occupying a post with such obligations, and thus my previous theological training and research interests currently coincide. I have long been interested in how the ideological commitments of the explicitly Christianized Byzantine empire and its attendant political exigencies coalesce, particularly with regard to religious boundaries. The idea of Byzantium as Christian underwent some degree of transformation under the high-level influence of the unusual emperor who stars in this book. The argument is that he had political reasons to bolster his own authority and employed religious ideology to do so. The historical context of Leo's reign, including regular contact with the 'Abbasid caliphate, compelled an emphasis on corporate religious identity reinforced via distinction to the Muslim other. My initial interest in his military manual, where he sought to shape combat philosophies by means of the piety of his generals, soon spread to questions about how he sought to strengthen the social fabric by means of pious legislation and outright homiletical exhortations. Underneath these literary goals lay Leo's understanding of Orthodox Christian theologies of chosenness and of leadership. The source of these answers can be found partially in ideas

indigenous to Byzantine culture, and more specifically in ecclesial and theological positions as exegeted from scripture and canon law. Throughout, I have sought to integrate history and theology, and to exploit the commonalities and discongruities of various genres in an attempt to scrutinize/decipher/interpret Leo's impact on Byzantine culture. The conclusions presented here are perhaps provisional, since so much of Byzantine literature in what was a prolific age of manuscript production offers opportunity for translation and further study.

My Duke colleagues on this quest have been a strong source of moral support and professional guidance. In particular, Stephen Chapman has consistently given excellent counsel, and his sense of humour never fails to put everything in perspective. The generous ear and wise exhortations of Willie Jennings (now at Yale) illuminated my path in puzzling times. The deep wisdom and pastoral care of Esther Acolatse (now at Toronto) nourished my soul. Ross Wagner is that rare colleague whose kindness reverberates for weeks, buoying the spirits. The jocularity of Will Willimon, our self-proclaimed 'peculiar prophet', has lightened many a tragic moment, and my favourite curmudgeon, Joel Marcus, reliably provides incisive comments that characteristically pierce the heart of the matter. Above all, Richard Hays's humility and scholarly brilliance have inspired the highest of goals.

The debts incurred by academic writers include more than intellectual mentors and colleagues. The members of my faculty writing groups, both online and at Duke, have helped immeasurably to advance this manuscript amid the clamour of teaching and advising hundreds of students. Regular writing retreats sponsored by the Thompson Writing Centre at Duke over the past two years have boosted flagging creative energies at key moments. I am grateful to my research assistants at Duke over the past five years for their aid in chasing down bibliographical references, checking Greek, and brainstorming interpretations of Byzantine Christian identities. These include Kevin Dumke, Christopher Howell, Brad Boswell, Philip Porter, and Bobby Douglas, all of whom are pursuing doctoral work of their own. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript, whose very helpful suggestions improved this monograph. Any errors that might inadvertently remain are of course my responsibility and do not reflect the much-appreciated efforts of the reviewers and editors. Fortunately, I was in the good hands of the aptly named Michael Sharp, whose attentive meticulousness assured the highest quality result. The production staff at Cambridge University Press were also a joy to work with, especially Marianne Nield.

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None of us is an island, and this manuscript would never have seen the light of day without the staunch support of family and friends. My deep gratitude belongs to Phyllis Jestice, a colleague who graciously read several early chapters, and to Judith Heyhoe, who very kindly compiled the indexes. My parents, Craig and Julie Dear, who raised me without a television so that I would read voraciously, deserve credit for creating a bibliophile whose natural habitat would be a library. My mother, a professional editor with an eagle eye, gave speedy and accurate feedback on dozens of drafts over the years. In Oxford, Graham and Valda Uden acted *in loco parentis*, providing true hospitality in a foreign land even to the point of collecting us from A&E after the accident that totalled our car. We might have thrown in the towel altogether at that point were it not for them. Ellie Gebarowski-Shafer, my writing partner at Oxford, faithfully met me every day at the Bodleian; her invigorating self-discipline helped me to stay on track and to expect the epiphanies. Fellow Byzantinist Maria Kouroumali lent an understanding ear, a steady shoulder, a ready smile, and the perfectly timed eye-roll when needed. She has proven to be one of the truest friends I have ever known. Ultimately of course, the mere idea of an academic career, much less the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity about Byzantium after that fateful journey to Turkey so many years ago, would never have come to fruition without the love and determination of my beloved husband, Detlev. This book is dedicated to him, *sine quo nihil*.

Chronology

19 Sep 866	Leo VI born
6 Jan 870	crowned co-emperor
879	elder brother Constantine dies
882	married Theophano (d.897), daughter Eudokia died young
Aug 883	imprisoned under suspicion of treason by Basil I
20 Jul 886	released from house arrest by Basil I on the Feast of Elijah
30 Aug 886	ascended to sole rule after death of Basil I
886	deposed Photios; replaced him in December with brother Stephen; Homily 22 delivered at Stephen's ordination
887–92	113 <i>Novels</i> promulgated
888	Homily 14, eulogy for Basil I delivered 29 August
890	relics of St Lazarus translated to Constantinople
890	<i>Hexabiblos</i> , new edition of <i>Basilika</i> , appears
893	Stephen dies; replaced by Antony II Kauleas on 3 Aug
895	conspiracy against Leo led by Tzantzes, Zaoutzes' son
895 or 896	Theophano died on 10 November
896	defeated by the Bulgars at Bulgarophyon; paid tribute to Symeon I Bulgaria
Jul 898	married Zoe Zaoutzaina, daughter Anna born
899	<i>Kletorologion</i> appears; Zoe dies sometime after September
900	married Eudokia Baiana (d.12 Apr 901, in childbirth)
900s	wrote the <i>Taktika</i>
900	conspiracy against Leo by Basil the Epeiktēs
12 Feb 901	Antony dies; replaced by Nicholas I Mystikos
902	Arabs take Taormina, Sicily
11 May 903	assassination attempt on Leo in Church of St Mokios
Aug 904	sack of Thessaloniki by the Arabs
Sep 905	son Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos born
906/7	revolt by <i>strategos</i> Andronikos Doukas

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Chronology

- | | |
|------------|--|
| 6 Jan 906 | Constantine VII baptized |
| Jun 906 | married Zoe Karbonopsina |
| Dec 906 | Leo denied entrance to Hagia Sophia by Nicholas at Christmas |
| 907 | <i>Procheiros Nomos</i> replaces Photios's <i>Eisagoge</i> |
| Jan 907 | Leo denied entrance to Hagia Sophia at Epiphany |
| Feb 907 | Nicholas exiled (with metropolitans who supported him) and replaced by Euthymios, Leo's spiritual father, as patriarch |
| Mar 907 | Leo granted dispensation with penance |
| 907 | <i>Procheiros Nomos</i> replaced Photios's <i>Eisagoge</i> |
| 15 May 908 | Constantine VII crowned co-emperor |
| 911 | Treaty with the Rus |
| 911/12 | fleet of Himerios annihilated in the Aegean by Leo of Tripoli and Damian |
| 11 May 912 | dies aged 45; succeeded by brother Alexander, who reinstated Nicholas as patriarch by prior agreement with Leo |