INTRODUCTION

Imaging Emperor and Empire in the Middle Byzantine Era

The tenth-century Byzantine chronicler Theophanes *Continuatus* reported for the year 830 that, upon the return of the courtier and diplomat John the Grammarian (d. 867) from a delegation to the Abbasid court at Baghdad, the latter advised the emperor Theophilos (r. 829–42) on the construction of an Islamicizing palace. This building, the Bryas (discussed further in Chapter 1), was "in imitation of Arab [palaces] and in no way differing from them in form or decoration."[1] The account demonstrates ninth-century imperial recognition of the prestige of "Arab" art and a desire to simulate the experience of an Abbasid courtly environment. Standing as a chronological bookend to Theophilos's Bryas, a late twelfth-century building in the imperial palace at Constantinople, the Mouchroutas Hall (discussed extensively in Chapter 5), likewise attests to Byzantine emulation of foreign prototypes. The building was the work of "a Persian hand," that is to say, a Seljuq artist. The chronicler who describes the hall, Nikolaos Mesarites (d. 1220), fully recognizes the aesthetic power of this Islamicizing work of art, which for him inspires "insatiable enjoyment. . . .not hidden, but on the surface."[2]

These two palaces offer important evidence for the adoption of foreign motifs and styles in Byzantine architecture and are often cited to illustrate cross-cultural interaction between Byzantium and the medieval Islamic world. Less commonly emphasized is the fact that both accounts attest to *imperial* patronage of exoticizing art. In this way, they participate in the construction of a cosmopolitan image of the Byzantine emperor that drew from foreign artistic

traditions to express Byzantine political supremacy. Like any imperial commission, these buildings were not merely aesthetic undertakings aimed at creating luxurious environments for the pleasure of the ruler and his entourage. They were also statements of imperial power that contributed to an "image" of authority projected through all facets of Byzantine visual culture, including art, architecture, and ceremony.[3]

Foreign elements appear in imperial imagery only selectively. Indeed, exoticizing motifs and styles are not a standard aspect of the middle Byzantine emperor's "official" depiction. Rather, they represent episodic ruptures within an otherwise highly formulaic articulation of power that promoted the middle Byzantine emperor as a universal leader reigning through divine endorsement. He is typically shown blessed by Christ, the Virgin Mary, or select saints. This typology is well illustrated in the numismatic record.[4] Coins, particularly in gold, consistently employ this iconographic type throughout the middle Byzantine period. *Nomisma* of the emperors John I Tzimisces (r. 969–76) and John II Komnenos (r. 1118–43), for instance, depict on the reverse an image of the ruler positioned frontally, wearing conventional regalia, and blessed by the Virgin Mary (Fig. 1a and b).[5] On the obverse, an image of Christ reminds the viewer of the Christomimetic (Christ-like) nature of the emperor's authority: Just as the Son of God reigns in Heaven, so the emperor rules on earth.[6] Intended for mass consumption, these coins traveled throughout the empire and throughout the ages, promulgating official imperial iconography and the ideologies of divine endorsement and Christomimesis that it encodes.[7]

Depictions in ivory, marble, mosaic, metalwork, and manuscripts also illustrate the official image of the emperor. A mid-tenth-century ivory plaque portraying Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (r. 945–59) (Fig. 2) and a page from a Gospel book depicting the twelfth-century emperor John II Komnenos (r. 1118–43) and his son Alexios (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Urb. gr. 2, fol. 10v) (Fig. 3) convey imperial authority through the topos of divine support.[8] In the ivory, the proximity of physiognomy between Constantine VII and Christ articulates the emperor's Christomimetic nature. In these and other imperial depictions, the ruler becomes an emblem of perfect *taxis*, or order. His composed and idealized form represents the similarly regulated and virtuous nature of the empire he ruled.[9] Among the most powerful articulations of this concept was that found in the Byzantine imperial throne room, the Chrysotriklinos, located in the Great Palace in Constantinople. Although the structure is no longer extant, ceremonial treatises explain that decorations added to the chamber in the mid-ninth century transformed it into a kind of *tableau vivant* of imperial ideology. When he assumed the royal seat, the emperor was positioned directly below an image of Christ enthroned. This juxtaposition established an unmistakable parallelism between heavenly and earthly regents. As a poetic inscription encircling the

1a. *Histamenon Nomisma* of John I Tzimisces (r. 969–76), Byzantine, 969–76, gold, diam. 2.2 cm, wt. 4.37 g, Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, D.C., BZC.1957.4.84. © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, D.C.

1b. *Hyperpyron Nomisma* of John II Komnenos (r. 1118–43), Byzantine, 1122–37 (?), gold, diam. 3.3 cm, wt. 4.33 g, Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, D.C., BZC.1948.17.3404. © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, D.C.

room proclaimed, the Chyrsotriklinos, or gold–throne room, was transformed into a Christotriklinos, the throne room of Christ.[10]

The historical record suggests that the audience for this imagery was deeply invested in its meanings and preservation. When the emperor Isaac I Komnenos (r. 1057–9) issued a coin that departed from the standard imperial typology by depicting the emperor in military, rather than ceremonial, attire and equipped with a prominent, unsheathed sword (Fig. 4), Byzantine commentators censured this innovative image on the grounds that it implied that the emperor's authority was gained by means of military acumen, not through the power of God.[11] Their response indicates that the official image of the emperor and the ideologies it perpetuated were constructions on which both ruler and ruled depended. Deviations from this expected formula in the public domain were not easily tolerated.[12]

Still, other typologies for imperial authority did exist. Although less prevalent in the official realm, Old Testament figures, foremost King David, offered an alternative rhetorical vocabulary for conveying imperial power in both texts and images. Beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition, Greco-Roman mythology and history also provided a range of gods, heroes, and rulers who served as prototypes and antitypes of the Byzantine emperor in word and image.[13] Furthermore, the descriptions of the Bryas Palace and Mouchroutas Hall attest to the possibility of expressing royal authority by still another means: Through the adoption of foreign artistic models. These buildings, preserved only in the textual record, are joined by extant portable works of art that likewise incorporate exotic iconographic and stylistic elements into programs that represent the Byzantine emperor – or his office – in literal and figurative terms. They demonstrate that the expression of political authority and identity was not limited to an immutable and hermetic official iconography of divine endorsement

2. Plaque showing the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (r. 945–59) crowned by Christ, Byzantine, mid-tenth century, ivory, ca. 19 by 10 cm, State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

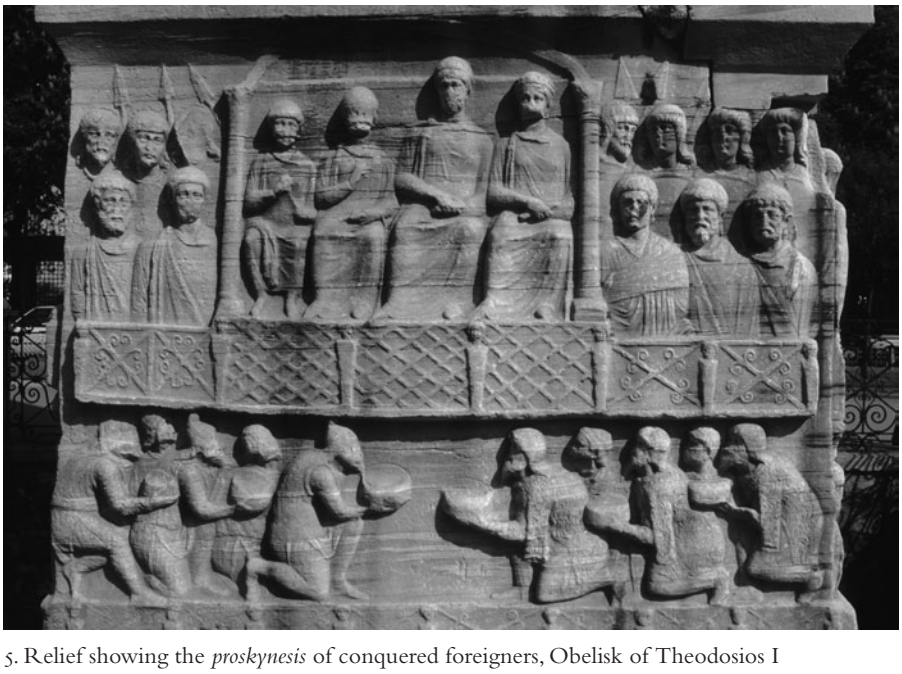
3. John II Komnenos (r. 1118–43) and his son Alexios, frontispiece to a Gospel book, Byzantine, twelfth century, pigment on vellum, 18.5 by 12 cm, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Urb. gr. 2, fol. 10v. By permission of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, with all rights reserved. © 2010 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

4. *Histamenon* of Isaac I Komnenos (r. 1057–9), Constantinople, Byzantine, 1057–9, gold, diam. 2.5 cm, wt. 4.37 g, Harvard Art Museums, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Bequest of Thomas Whittemore, 1951.31.4.1590. Photo: Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

or to the perpetuation of Greek and Roman precedents and biblical typologies, but could also respond to and participate in a contemporary, cross-cultural visual dialogue of royal power and prestige.

In advocating for the recognition of Byzantine imperial art as innovative and responsive, this study builds upon the work of numerous scholars working across disciplines who argue for interpreting Byzantium as an open and flexible culture and for judging imperial ideology as adaptive over time.[14] Yet I approach this common goal through a different path, by considering the incorporation of *foreign* iconographic motifs and stylistic features into middle Byzantine imperial imagery, a theme that has not previously been the focus of extended study.[15] Earlier considerations of imperial imagery and ideology generally conclude that Byzantium's apparent conservatism is in fact an ongoing "invention of tradition."[16] According to these studies, the message of Byzantine power remained potent because it was subtly refashioned over time: Both its overt conservatism and its covert innovation were essential to its survival. In contrast, my approach focuses on works of art that operate outside of traditional iconographies and therefore embody more radical departures from the official imperial image. They point to Byzantine awareness of and reaction to foreign cultures, which resulted in a cosmopolitan notion of Byzantine imperial identity that operated alongside conventional iconographies and ideologies of divinely endorsed universal dominion.

Within medieval ruler imagery, eclecticism and permeability are not unique features of middle Byzantine imperial art. In fact, the adoption of nonindigenous iconography is more often associated with upstart or dependent medieval polities of the tenth to thirteenth centuries – like the Armenian court at Aghtamar or the Norman court at Palermo in Sicily – where the royal iconographies of Byzantium and various Islamic dynasties were copied in an effort to stake claims to political and cultural relevance.[17] In these situations, Byzantium is the model, the universal power in the image of which smaller and/or newer rivals and clients inevitably defined themselves and from which these lesser polities appropriated iconographies of rulership. To posit that cross-cultural adoptions also characterize Byzantine imperial imagery and ideology runs against an expectation for the preservation of Byzantine supremacy and homogeneity. In what follows, I argue that recognition of and adoption from



5. Relief showing the *proskynesis* of conquered foreigners, Obelisk of Theodosios I (r. 379–95), Byzantine, ca. 390, marble, Hippodrome, Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey). © Vanni / Art Resource, NY.

foreign art did not require Byzantium to relinquish its claim to superior cultural and political status. Indeed, more often than not, the objects and monuments studied here introduce iconographic and stylistic innovations that are engineered to affirm the notion of Byzantium's privileged status and universal dominion, even in the face of economic, military, and political realities that indicated otherwise.

In addition, it must be noted that middle Byzantine adoption of foreign artistic features was not unprecedented. Early Byzantine imperial images already incorporated exotic elements, albeit in a more literal fashion than that found in the middle Byzantine era. For instance, some early Byzantine works of art perpetuate a feature of Roman iconography by depicting prostrate barbarians who recognize the triumphant emperor.[18] A late fourth-century relief on the base of the Obelisk of Theodosios I (r. 379–95), located along the *spina* (central platform) of the Hippodrome in Constantinople, shows conquered foreigners paying homage to the Byzantine ruler (Fig. 5).[19] Their exotic headgear and generously bearded faces clearly mark them as originating from outside the Byzantine sphere. Indeed, their attributes identify the group to the left as eastern foes, most likely Sasanians, and that to the right as northern enemies, probably Goths, thereby demonstrating the universal power of Theodosios, who controlled people and domains in all directions.[20] These figures embody the

edges of empire, where territory was expanded and secured. Their obeisance attests to the integrity and prowess of Byzantine universal rule.

Consistency with Roman models characterizes the Byzantine imperial image in subsequent centuries as well, but increasingly connections are drawn between the emperor and Christian emblems of authority. A sixth-century polyptych, the so-called Barberini Ivory, which may portray Justinian I (r. 527–65), shows Tellus (the personification of earth) reaching toward the emperor's foot in a gesture of submission, a Sasanian figure cowering behind the emperor's rearing horse as he humbly touches the ruler's spear, and an exotic array of barbarian supplicants processing in the register below (Fig. 6).[21] The costumes worn and gifts carried by the foreign figures on the left evoke their Sasanian origin and the eastern limits of Byzantine dominion, while the figures to the right suggest a more distant territory, perhaps the farther lands of India.[22] The emperor's power is affirmed by the personification of victory, Nike, who reaches to crown him. More importantly, Christ appears at the apex of the scene and extends his hand to bless the ruler. This image joins a Roman vocabulary of terrestrial dominion with a Christian iconography of divinely sanctioned authority. In both the obelisk and the ivory, empire and its integrity are conveyed through the ruler's unquestionable mastery of the people at its edges, the barbarians along its borders.

The literal depiction of exotic peoples and the worldly expression of imperial authority that it embodies were certainly not the predominant images promoted in the middle Byzantine period. That position was inarguably occupied by the official iconography of divine endorsement discussed above. Indeed, the Roman-Byzantine theme of the prostrate barbarian no longer features prominently after Iconoclasm.[23] This may be due to the fact that Byzantium's territories had significantly contracted since the time of Theodosios I and Justinian; to have depicted actual barbarians may have been an unwelcome reminder of how insecure imperial control had in fact become.[24] Nonetheless, exoticizing works of middle Byzantine art and architecture persist in constructing a comparable message of universal dominion and cultural superiority over other peoples. Rather than depicting foreigners in literal terms, middle Byzantine imperial art subtly deploys exotic iconographic and stylistic elements as surrogates for foreign cultures; while visually distinct from earlier imperial traditions, they are conceptually consistent with these precedents. Exoticizing works of art show that middle Byzantine imperial authority could be conceived to be as much of this world as it was of the divine sphere, as much a response to contemporary medieval reality as a perpetuation of seemingly immutable traditions from the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman past.

The more periodic concepts of imperial power that these unofficial objects and monuments depict were no doubt intended for the most privileged and powerful audience in medieval Byzantium, the members of the imperial court.[25] The Bryas Palace and Mouchroutas Hall, for example, were both

6. Barberini polyptych, Constantinople (?), Byzantine, first half of the sixth century (?), ivory, 34.2 cm by 27.8 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France, OA 9063. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY. Photo: Chuzeville.

privileged environments of the emperor and his entourage. Other works of art discussed in this study are characterized by the use of valuable materials and high levels of craftsmanship, which point to their production for the social elite. In addition they display complex iconographic programs that

patrons and designers could anticipate would be understood by the educated and discerning members of the Constantinopolitan court. These less conventional works of imperial art and architecture record shifting attitudes toward foreign cultures at the highest levels of society. They circulated among individuals who controlled the bulk of Byzantium's resources and served as the stewards of its destiny. In this respect, these objects and monuments claim an essential place in our understanding of Byzantine imperial imagery, ideology, and identity.

An active role for foreign iconography in imperial artistic programs is in keeping with the cosmopolitan character of Byzantine aristocratic culture that has emerged in studies over recent decades.[26] The middle Byzantine capital and court were dynamic and fluid realms, through which foreign objects and people regularly moved.[27] Furthermore, with the truncation of the empire over the course of the middle Byzantine era, especially as a result of the loss of territories to the Seljuqs in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the emperor was obliged to confront the reality of foreign threats along the ever-shrinking borders of his domain. He accomplished this task literally, by undertaking military expeditions against his enemies and engaging in diplomatic negotiations with their emissaries. Yet just as importantly, he – and his supporters – executed a symbolic defense of the empire and asserted the stability of imperial power through works of art and literature, even when such messages were at odds with political and military reality. It is the construction of this image of power that the present study explores.

Chapter 1, "Emulation. Islamic Imports in the Iconoclast Era – Power, Prestige, and the Imperial Image," documents how emperors ruling in the period just prior to the beginning of the middle Byzantine era incorporated foreign motifs into imperial imagery. Ninth-century works of art and architecture, especially silks, produced under the predominantly iconoclast Amorian dynasty (820–67) incorporate Sasanian-Islamic iconographic and stylistic features into Byzantine imperial architectural foundations and depictions of the emperor at the royal hunt. An interest in foreign iconography is often perceived as a compensation for the rejection of Christian figural representation during Iconoclasm. Instead, I propose that active emulation of exotic artistic forms should be understood as a form of cultural rivalry that mirrored competitive dynamics in other aspects of Byzantium's interaction with foreign groups, especially the Abbasid dynasty. I emphasize that the use of exotic forms in imperial imagery was not an invention of the Macedonian emperors (867–1056) but a continuation of earlier Iconoclast-era sensibilities.

Chapter 2, "Appropriation. Stylistic Juxtaposition and the Expression of Power," turns to the iconophile Macedonian dynasty, under which the imperial image is usually argued to have eventually assumed a distinctly Orthodox Christian visual vocabulary. In the domain of imperial imagery of the hunt