

Introduction: the imperial image as gift

As Latin Crusaders gazed intently at the city of Constantinople for the first time in June 1203, Geoffroi de Villehardouin claimed that there was “no man so brave and daring that his flesh did not shudder at the sight.”¹ Even docked at a distance from the illustrious Byzantine capital on the Bosphoros, rich palaces and tall churches could be seen beyond the city’s famed lofty walls and towers. While Constantinople had held a privileged position in the medieval Mediterranean as the center of luxury, learning, and holy Christian relics since its foundation by Constantine the Great in the fourth century, the arrival and subsequent conquests of the Crusaders inaugurated a new era for the capital and the larger empire. After more than half a century of Latin occupation (1204–61), which included the massive exportation of the city’s most precious treasures, the Byzantines reclaimed Constantinople. But the reconquest came at a great cost, and scholars have generally characterized the subsequent two centuries as a period of decline marked by political fragility and economic scarcity.

In contrast to the awe of the European Crusaders, expressed in such visceral terms by Villehardouin, over a century later in the mid-fourteenth century, Byzantine historian Nikephoros Gregoras lamented the diminished circumstances of his once-celebrated capital. After the coronation of Byzantine Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos in 1347, Gregoras observed that there was nothing left in the imperial treasury “but air and dust and, as they say, the atoms of Epicurus.”² Nostalgic laments such as this have shaped not only contemporary perceptions but also most modern scholarly assessments of what has come to be known as the Late Byzantine or Palaiologan period, or the period between the Byzantine restoration of Constantinople in 1261 and the final conquest of the city by the Ottomans in 1453. Nostalgia is a seductive sentiment. How can we not be moved by the fact that the Late Byzantine imperial crown worn by John VI at his coronation was inlaid with

¹ *Chronicles of the Crusades*, trans. Margaret Shaw (Harmondsworth, 1963), 59.
² Gregoras, *Byzantina Historia*, vol. II (Bonn, 1829–55), 790: καὶ πλὴν ἄερος καὶ κόνεως καὶ τῶν Ἐπικουρείων εἰπεῖν ἀτόμων.

mere colored glass, the original gems having been pawned to the Republic of Venice earlier in the century?³

Notions of decline and twilight, however, overshadow a reality of more nuanced cultural relations during the Palaiologan period. In the face of this economic and political adversity, classical education and intellectual life flourished. Indeed, even in lamenting the sad state of the treasury, Gregoras betrays his learned status and his ties to a long Hellenic heritage by describing bankruptcy (emptiness) in Epicurean terms. The visual arts thrived as well, as testified, for instance, by the celebrated mosaics and frescoes of Constantinople's Church of the Chora and the myriad icons and precious portable objects brought together in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2004 exhibition "Byzantium: Faith and Power, 1261–1557."⁴ The unsurpassed vibrancy of Byzantine art during this period has often been described, although somewhat problematically, as a "Palaiologan Renaissance," and a spate of recent exhibitions have paid tribute to the artistic traditions of later Byzantium on a grand scale.⁵ In celebrating the visual culture of the final two centuries of Byzantium, an acknowledgment of the empire's diminished political and economic standing serves only to highlight the very strengths of its artistic traditions. Despite poverty and political fragility, the arts of the era held together the larger Orthodox *oikoumene*.⁶

³ The crown jewels were held in the Treasury of San Marco as a guarantee of a loan that was never repaid. This episode will be discussed at greater length below in the introduction to Part II.

⁴ The 2004 "blockbuster" exhibition "Byzantium: Faith and Power, 1261–1557" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with its sumptuous and weighty exhibition catalog and symposium papers published subsequently, is to be commended for promoting interest in things Palaiologan among both scholars and the general public. See Helen C. Evans (ed.), *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)* (New Haven, 2004) (hereafter abbreviated to *BFP*) with accompanying colloquium papers edited by Sarah T. Brooks, *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557). Perspectives on Late Byzantine Art and Culture* (New Haven, 2006).

⁵ Recent exhibitions at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles (2007) and the Royal Academy of Arts in London (2008) included significant later Byzantine material. See Robert S. Nelson and Kristen M. Collins (eds.), *Icons from Sinai: Holy Image, Hallowed Ground* (Los Angeles, 2006); and Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki (eds.), *Byzantium, 330–1453* (London, 2008). A number of colloquia and exhibitions have resulted in the main literature on later Byzantine art. See, for example, *Art et société à Byzance sous les Paléologues: Actes du Colloque organisé par l'Association internationale des études byzantines à Venise en septembre 1968* (Venice, 1971); Slobodan Ćurčić and Doula Mouriki (eds.), *The Twilight of Byzantium: Aspects of Cultural and Religious History in the Late Byzantine Empire: Papers from the Colloquium Held at Princeton University, 8–9 May 1989* (Princeton, 1991); Antonio Iacobini and Mauro della Valle (eds.), *L'arte di Bisanzio e l'Italia al tempo dei Paleologi, 1261–1453* (Papers presented at the Convegno internazionale d'arte bizantina, Rome, 1994) (Rome, 1999 [*Milione* 5]); and the *Byzantium: Faith and Power* exhibition catalogue and accompanying colloquium papers cited in note 4 above.

⁶ Maria Parani's review of the catalogue for the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in *Speculum*, 83(1) (2008), 191–3, characterizes this position well.

This book proceeds from the claim that the arts thrived in the face of political and economic decline, but it further interrogates the particular mechanisms by which the visual arts defined later Byzantium. How and why were certain visual strategies adopted in the face of the decline felt so acutely by Gregoras and other intellectuals of the time? Furthermore, what sort of image did rulers of this impoverished empire cultivate and project to the wider medieval world? Which particular ideological associations to the past were visually cultivated and which were elided?

Although scholars recognize the paradoxical discrepancy between economic weakness and cultural strength during this period, none of them has pursued an explanation for this phenomenon. One way to understand this apparent enigma, this book suggests, is to recognize that later Byzantine diplomatic strategies, despite or because of diminishing political advantage, relied on an increasingly desirable cultural and artistic heritage. In the later Byzantine period, power must, out of economic necessity, be constructed in non-monetary terms within the realm of culture. In an attempt to reassess the role of cultural production in an era most often described in terms of decline, this study focuses on the intersection of two central and related thematics – the imperial image and the gift – as they are reconceived in the final centuries of the Byzantine Empire. Through the analysis of art objects created specifically for diplomatic exchange alongside key examples of Palaiologan imperial imagery and ritual, this book traces the circulation of the image of the emperor – in such sumptuous materials as silk, bronze, gold, and vellum – at the end of the empire.

Drawing on diverse visual and textual materials that have traditionally been eclipsed in favor of the earlier Byzantine period, this book interrogates the manner in which previous visual paradigms of sovereignty and generosity were adapted to suit diminished contemporary realities. It is therefore situated at the convergence of art, empire, and decline. In this way, this book expands discussions of cultural exchange and boundary crossings by prompting us to question how the concept of decline reconfigures categories of wealth and value, categories that lie at the core of cultural exchange.

Pharmakon and apotropaion

In an encomium for Michael VIII Palaiologos, court orator Manuel Holobolos expresses the power of the emperor's image as a gift. According to Holobolos, at the negotiations of the Treaty of Nymphaion through which the Genoese joined forces with Michael Palaiologos with the aim of

recovering Constantinople (1261), the Genoese requested an image of the emperor as a visible expression of protection and love for their city. The imperial image for the Genoese, Holobolos claims, would be a great remedy, a strong defense, an averter, a powerful parapet, a strong tower, and an adamantine wall.⁷ The word choices here are significant. Not only is the imperial image associated with key fortifications to protect a city (parapet, tower, wall), it is also described as a *pharmakon* (φάρμακον) and an *apotropaion* (ἀποτρόπαιον). The former, an ambiguous term, which can be translated in entirely opposite, almost contradictory ways, holds a privileged position in theoretical discussions of gift-giving,⁸ while the latter is suggestive of cult images and amulets. Holobolos thus ascribes to the imperial image an efficacy usually reserved for sacred icons in Byzantium.⁹ The Virgin's icon was understood to be particularly efficacious. The Akathistos Hymn hails the Theotokos as the "impregnable wall of the kingdom . . . through whom trophies are raised up . . . [and] through whom enemies fall," and her icon famously led battles and processions along Constantinople's walls at key perilous moments.¹⁰ In the oration, however, Holobolos is describing the potency of the image of the emperor, not the Virgin, and this raises complicated issues of imperial allegiance and hierarchy.

The imperial image in Byzantium constituted the fundamental visual manifestation of sovereignty, and it often commemorated imperial munificence. In the heart of the empire at Hagia Sophia, the celebrated suite of imperial mosaics on the easternmost wall of the south gallery conveys the broader ideology of imperial largesse through the representation of very

⁷ M. Treu (ed.), *Orationes*, 2 vols. (Potsdam, 1906), 1:46.27–34; and X. A. Siderides, "Μανουήλ Ὁλοβόλου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς Μιχαήλ Η΄ Παλαιολόγον," *ΕΕΒΣ*, 3 (1926), 188: δύνатаί Σου καὶ ἡ εἰκὼν, ἂν ἡμῖν παρὲν, πολλὰ ἀμυντήριον ἔσται κατὰ τῶν ἡμετέρων ἀντιπάλων στερεόν, πάσης ἐπιβουλῆς ἀποτρόπαιον, ἑπαλξίς τῃ σῇ καὶ ἡμετέρᾳ πόλει κρατερὰ, προσπύργιον ἰσχυρόν καὶ τεῖχος ἀντικρὺς ὁδομάντινον. The Treaty of Nymphaion and this oration are discussed at greater length in Chapter 1.

⁸ The significance of the *pharmakon* for discussions of the gift has informed a wide range of critical thinkers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Jacques Derrida. The double-edged notion of the gift as both a blessing and a curse appears in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The *pharmakon*'s contradictory ambivalence constitutes the opening premise, and even the working method, for Derrida's essay "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981), 131–2.

⁹ Given this evocative language, Henry Maguire, "Magic and Money in the Early Middle Ages," *Speculum*, 72(4) (1997), 1040 [repr. *Image and Imagination in Byzantine Art* (Aldershot, 2007), V], links the portrait described by Holobolos to the wonderworking icon of the Hodegetria.

¹⁰ As will be further discussed in Chapter 3, the penultimate strophe of the Akathistos emphasizes this powerful aspect of the Virgin: χαῖρε, τῆς ἐκκλησίας ὁ ἀσάλευτος πύργος; χαῖρε, δι' ἧς ἐγείρονται τρόπαια, χαῖρε, δι' ἧς ἐχθροὶ καταπίπτουσι.



Figure 0.1 Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, general view of the mosaics on the east wall of the south gallery

specific acts of donation to the church (Figure 0.1). These panels present a double articulation of imperial gift-giving separated by roughly a century: Constantine IX Monomachos (r. 1042–55) and Zoe with Christ occupy the north side of the wall to the viewer’s left (Figure 0.2), and John II Komnenos (r. 1118–43) and Eirene with the Virgin and Child appear on the south side to the right (Figure 0.3).¹¹ The Macedonian and Komnenian emperors hold sacks of money, their monetary offering for the church, and the empresses carry scrolls with inscriptions, signaling a recording of the donation.¹² The

¹¹ The scholarship on these mosaics is vast, much of it focusing on the changes to the eleventh-century panel, including Nicolas Oikonomides, “The Mosaic Panel of Constantine IX and Zoe in Saint Sophia,” *REB*, 36 (1978), 219–32; and Ioli Kalavrezou, “Irregular Marriages in the 11th Century and the Zoe and Constantine Mosaic in Hagia Sophia” in A. Laiou and D. Simon (eds.), *Law and Society in Byzantium: Ninth to Twelfth Centuries* (Washington DC, 1994). See also Robin Cormack, “Interpreting the Mosaics of S. Sophia at Istanbul,” *Art History*, 4(2) (1981), 141–6 [repr. *The Byzantine Eye: Studies in Art and Patronage* (1989), VIII]; and Robin Cormack, “The Emperor at St. Sophia: Viewer and Viewed” in J. Durand and A. Guillou (eds.), *Byzance et les images: Cycle de conférences organisé au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel du 5 octobre au 7 décembre 1992* (Paris, 1994), 223–53.

¹² The monetary offering known as the *apokombion* (ἀποκόμβιον) was a heavy purse of coins for imperial distribution on feast days. The name derives from the knot (*kombos*) with which the sack was tied. On *apokombia*, see Alexander Kazhdan, “Apokombion,” *ODB*; and Albert Vogt



Figure 0.2 Constantine IX Monomachos and Zoe with Christ, south gallery mosaics, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, eleventh century

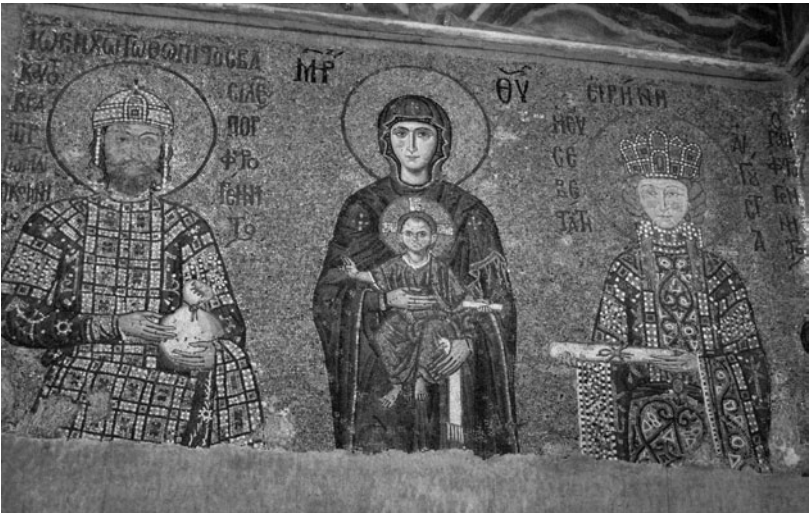


Figure 0.3 John II Komnenos and Eirene with the Virgin and Child, south gallery mosaics, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, twelfth century

emperor's role as benefactor of the church is here made visually explicit, as imperial largesse funded the celebration of the liturgy in the Great Church. The mosaics themselves in turn constitute a gift to the church, one that memorializes such imperial munificence.¹³

The middle Byzantine mosaics of the upper gallery of Hagia Sophia encapsulate the manner in which the imperial office is inscribed through the ritual performance and visual commemoration of gift-giving. A key innovation in imperial imagery in the later Byzantine period testifies to the continued if not closer alignment of the imperial image with largesse. The emperor's effigy was included on acts of donation themselves, chrysobulls, for the first time in the early Palaiologan period.¹⁴ A number of chrysobulls adorned with illuminated portraits survive from the Palaiologan period, three of which are associated with Andronikos II (r. 1282–1328), including one currently in the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens granting and extending the privileges of the metropolitan of Monembasia in 1301 (Figure 0.4).¹⁵ Composed of four vellum sheets, which joined together reach

(ed. and trans.), *Le Livre des Cérémonies* (Paris, 1935), vol. I, *Commentary*, 64–6; A. Laiou, *EHB*, 1014; and Michael Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy, c. 300–1450* (Cambridge, 1985), 196, 338–9, 355–6.

¹³ For interpretations of the mosaics in terms of imperial largesse, see Natalia Teteriatnikov, “Hagia Sophia: The Two Portraits of the Emperors with Moneybags as a Functional Setting,” *Arte Medievale*, n.s. 10(1) (1996), 47–67, who reads the mosaics a reminder to the patriarch and his clergy of the benevolent patronage of the emperor, and by extension of their dependence on his largesse; and Leslie Brubaker, “The Visualization of Gift-Giving in Byzantium and the Mosaics at Hagia Sophia” in Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre (eds.), *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2010), 33–61.

¹⁴ A. Heisenberg, *Aus der Geschichte und der Literatur der Palaiologenzeit* (Munich, 1920), 25–33; Tania Velmans, “Le portrait dans l’art des Paléologues” in *Art et société à Byzance sous les Paléologues*, 104–6; Iohannis Spatharakis, *The Portrait in Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts* (Leiden, 1976), 184–9; and, more recently, Anthony Cutler, “Legal Iconicity: Documentary Images, the Problem of Genre, and the Work of the Beholder” in Colum Hourihane (ed.), *Byzantine Art: Recent Studies, Essays in Honor of Lois Drewer* (Brepols, 2009), 63–80; and Annemarie Weyl Carr, “Three Illuminated Chrysobulls of Andronikos II?” *Nea Rhome*, 6 (2009), 451–64. On chrysobulls more generally, see Nicolas Oikonomides, “La chancellerie impériale de Byzance du 13e au 15e siècle,” *REB*, 43 (1985), 167–95; and Andreas E. Müller, “Imperial Chrysobulls” in Elizabeth Jeffreys with John Haldon and Robin Cormack (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford, 2008), 129–35.

¹⁵ M. Evangelatou, H. Papastavrou, and P.-T. Skotti (eds.), *Byzantium: An Oecumenical Empire* (Athens, 2002), 144–6 (cat. no. 53). In addition to the one in Athens issued for Monembasia in 1301 (now in the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens), the other extant chrysobulls of Andronikos II include one issued to the see of Kanina in Albania in 1307 (now in the Morgan Library in New York), and a third that, based on its iconography, was probably also issued for the church of the Helkomenos in Monembasia (it presently serves as a prefatory page pasted in a twelfth-century book in the British Museum, Add. Ms. 37006). See F. Dölger, *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden des Oströmischen Reiches* (Munich, 1925), 34 and 49; P. J. Alexander, “A Chrysobull of the Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologus in Favor of the See of Kanina in



Figure 0.4a Chrysobull of Andronikos II Palaiologos, 1301, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens (BXM 00534)

nearly 80 inches in length, the chrysobull concludes with the emperor’s signature in deep red ink and commences with a miniature of Andronikos offering to Christ a rolled white scroll meant to reference the chrysobull itself. The miniature thus depicts the emperor in the act of donating the very scroll that bears both the representation as well as the textual attestation of the gift itself. The imperial portrait on Palaiologan chrysobulls such as this solidifies the emperor’s gift in an almost legal manner, while simultaneously transforming the viewer into a witness to the transaction.¹⁶

Albania,” *Byzantion*, 15 (1940–1), 167–207; N. Kavrus-Hoffmann, “Catalogue of Greek Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Collections of the United States of America, Part IV: The Morgan Library and Museum,” *Manuscripta* 52(1) (2008), 65–174; and Carr, “Three Illuminated Chrysobulls,” 451–64. As Carr points out, the texts of a number of Andronikos’s chrysobulls were copied into the vaults of a chapel of the Hodegetria in Mistra. On the phenomenon of transferring documents to walls of Byzantine churches, see Sophia Kalopissi-Verti, “Church Inscriptions as Documents: Chrysobulls – Ecclesiastical Acts – Inventories – Donations – Wills,” *ΔΧΑΕ*, 24 (2003), 79–88.

¹⁶ Cutler, “Legal Iconicity,” 65ff. Cutler’s study takes as its point of departure the chrysobull issued by Alexios III Komnenos of Trebizond for the Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos in 1374 that depicts the ruler, along with his wife Theodora Kantakouzene. The Dionysiou example served as the source for an icon of the Emperor with the Prodomos in lieu of his wife. On the Dionysiou chrysobull and icon, see Athanasios A. Karakatsanis (ed.), *Treasures of Mount Athos* (Thessaloniki, 1997). A further illuminated chrysobull was issued by Đurađ Branković for the Esphigmenou monastery on Mount Athos in 1429, which depicts the Serbian despot alongside his wife Irene Kantazouzene and their family.

Innovations such as this highlight the alignment of the imperial image and the gift in later Byzantium. Not surprisingly, there is a rich corpus of visual material that relates to imperial gift exchange in its various permutations. Accordingly, this book treats the later Byzantine imperial image as a gift, and a series of objects that invoke gift-giving constitutes its archive. Not all the objects, however, are gifts per se. Chapter 3, for example, focuses on coinage, traditionally understood as the means of economic exchange in contradistinction to the gift. But in Byzantium, the emperor dispersed coins bearing his effigy in a ritualized performance much closer to giving than buying or selling. Moreover, in my reading of the radical innovations in numismatic iconography following the Byzantine restoration of Constantinople in 1261, coins constitute an image of thanksgiving in and of themselves linked to the lost bronze monumental representation of imperial giving, which is the subject of Chapter 2. The other chapters examine objects created as gifts and extended to such varied sites as Genoa, Paris, and Moscow: one explicitly associated with a diplomatic treaty, another offered at the conclusion of a failed diplomatic mission, and yet another following upon a marriage alliance. Despite variations, all the objects under investigation engage the action of giving, which is inflected with subtle though discernible calibrations of hierarchy. Furthermore, they all represent the emperor in relation to the action of giving. In this way, this book associates the image of the emperor with the matter of gift-giving. As elucidated by a substantial body of anthropological scholarship, gift-giving is neither free nor disinterested, but rather works in complex ways to establish and recalibrate contingent relations of power and hierarchy. For this reason, my attention to the imperial image as a gift provides a crucial optic for re-evaluating the reconfiguration of Byzantine sovereignty at a time of diminished political sway through one of its most important representations: the image of the emperor.

Throughout the Byzantine Empire, the likeness of the emperor and imperial largesse consistently served as a centerpiece for diplomatic strategies. Rich source material from the middle Byzantine period exposes the protocols of Byzantine diplomacy. These primary sources have been culled by scholars to demonstrate the centrality of imperial largesse to the notion of Byzantine identity. Imperial sources adumbrate what kinds of gifts are appropriate for foreign ambassadors, both at court in Constantinople and abroad,

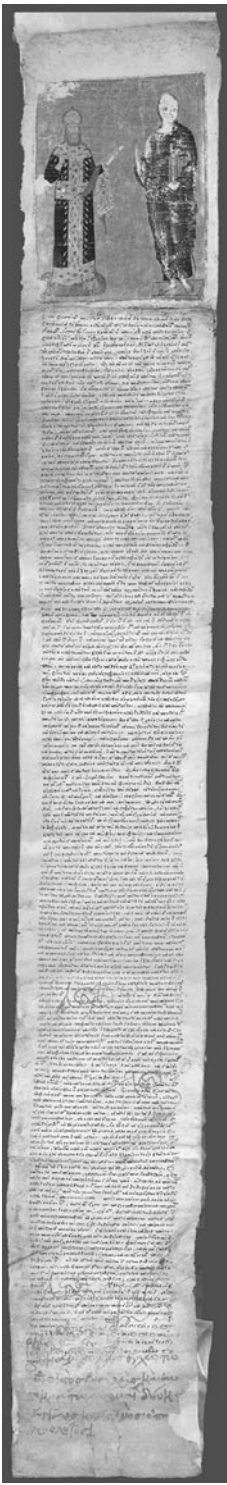


Figure 0.4b

and they emphasize the diplomatic rituals of reciprocity and display as fundamental to negotiations. The emperor, as the embodiment of empire, establishes and reinforces his superiority through extravagant demonstrations of largesse, and he solidifies alliances through such means. It is through the giving of gifts and the resulting enactment of allegiances that the very contours of the empire are drawn. But this model becomes problematic when seen through the lens of the later Byzantine period and its constricted visions of imperium. If hierarchy is implicit in imperial gifts from Constantinople, what happens when the distance between real and represented grandeur becomes so vast? In other words, if to give a gift – and an imperial image as a gift in particular – is to inscribe hierarchy and to position the recipient as indebted, how can a gift from a beleaguered empire in the throes of disintegration convey superiority? What are the precise mechanisms by which giving can still convey the greatness of its giver? These questions prompt a critical rethinking of our understanding of the period, not only of the role of Byzantium within other cultural formations but also of the relation of the visual arts to empire, ascendancy, and decline.

Another development of the Palaiologan period underscores the power of the emperor's portrait to proclaim his suzerainty: the imperial image became codified as official insignia in court dress in the later Byzantine period.¹⁷ Pseudo-Kodinos explicitly describes a headdress that bears an imperial portrait as a *skaranikon*,¹⁸ representations of which are attested in most media, both portable and monumental.¹⁹ Among the most notable examples is the fourteenth-century typikon for the convent of the Mother

¹⁷ Earlier art objects such as two ivory plaques depicting Empress Ariadne wearing a *tablion* decorated with an imperial bust. See W. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters* (Mainz am Rhein, 1976), 49–50; and K. Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York, 1979), 31–2. But images such as these are rare, and only in the Palaiologan period does the imperial image become codified as an integral – and official – component of court dress. See notes 18–22 below.

¹⁸ Pseudo-Kodinos, *Traité des offices*, edited by Jean Verpeaux (Paris, 1966), 152–3. See Maria Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images: Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography (11th–15th Centuries)* (Leiden, 2003), 70 and 358; and Maria Parani, “Cultural Identity and Dress: The Case of Late Byzantine Ceremonial Costume,” *JÖB*, 57 (2007), 95–134.

¹⁹ In manuscript, the most notable example is in the Lincoln College Typikon, on which see below. It is also worn by the Grand Duke Apokaukos in his copy of the works of Hippocrates (Paris BN 2144), on which see *BFP*, 26–7 (cat. no. 2). The *skaranikon* also appears on icons. Grand Primercerion John wears such a headdress on the fourteenth-century icon of Christ Pantokrator in the Hermitage (on which see Alice Bank, *Byzantine Art in the Collections of Soviet Museums* (New York, 1978), 281–4) and Constantine Akropolites appears in such a headdress in the lower left corner of the silver frame of Virgin Hodegetria icon in the Tret'iakov Gallery, on which see Bank, *Byzantine Art*, 252–4; and *BFP*, 28–30 (cat. no. 4). On the ideological valences of court dress during the later Byzantine period more generally, which includes a discussion of the *skaranikon*, see the compelling article by Parani, “Cultural Identity and Dress,” 95–134.