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A PORTRAIT OF A PALAIOLOGAN EMPEROR

Byzantium devoted its art to reinforce the legal potentiality of the monarchy.¹ The imperial image expressed the essential characteristics attributed by imperial ideology to the superhuman incumbent of the supreme power, emphasizing his virtues as God's image, reflecting his generosity and mercy.

The *laureata*, the imperial portraits, had a clearly defined political and juridical function. Thanks to the mysticism associated with the imperial dignity, the portraits could serve as vicars in the absence of the emperor and thus implement authority and confirm legitimacy to the law courts, the activities in market places, assemblies, plays in the theater and races at the Hippodrome. The imperial images represented the absent emperor's sacred person and gave sanction to the decisions of the magistracy. They were carried about in solemn processions and became the object of acclamations and *proskynesis*, the Oriental way of expressing total submission to a sovereign by prostration with the face to the ground. In front of the portraits, candles were lit and incense burnt.

The portrait-like similarity was of decisive importance. A plastic formula was developed to create an abstract vision of the imperial person, superhumanly elevated and distanced from his subject. In spite of this tendency, true portrait-like features are clearly manifested.

The portraits testified to the legitimacy of documents and treaties and to the monetary value of coins. Imperial statues were raised in public places around the empire and sent to distant provinces, to co-emperors and subjects at the moment of accession to the throne of a new emperor. The formal recognition of a new ruler depended on their acceptance or rejection. The imperial images also functioned as legal refuge for citizens in danger. *Ad statuas confugere*, to take refuge at the statues, implied an inviolable civil right for every citizen to claim the support of imperial law.

To the well-connected dogma of the imperial cult belonged the idea of divine intervention whenever an emperor was elected and the absolute necessity of the existence of the Roman Empire in the divine plan of the cosmic order. Consequently, divine and imperial authority intermingle by nature. God rules the Byzantine Empire in concert with the emperor (συμβασιλεύει). This fundamental dogma of the monarchic religion with neo-platonic elements is expressed in Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos' treatise, *De ceremoniis*:²

In this way does the imperial power, when exerted with order and measure, function as an image (εἰκονίζου) of the harmonious movement that the Creator (τοῦ δημιουργοῦ) has established in the universe and thus the empire will appear more majestic, at the same time more agreeable and more admirable.

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¹ A. Grabar, *L'Empereur dans l'art byzantin*, (Paris, 1936). L. Bréhier, P. Batiffol, *Les survivances du culte impérial romain*, (Paris, 1920). O. Treitinger, *Die oströmische Kaiser - und Reichsidee nach ihrer Gestaltung im höfischen Zeremoniell*, (Darmstadt, 1956).

² C. Porphyrogenetos. *De ceremoniis*, vol. 1, ed. A. Vogt, (Paris, 1967), 2.

A similar idea is expressed by Manuel II Paleologos in his advice to his son and co-emperor, John:³

God will provide good things in abundance for You, knowing that You owe Your power from him, realizing that You are his servant and rejoicing more as God's servant than as ruler over others.

Court ceremonies developed into a veritable liturgy. The sanctuary was the Sacred Palace. The imperial garments assumed form and colour according to the rhythm of the church festivals. Particular dressing-rooms in the palace, *mitatoria*, were used for changing the imperial garments according to a strictly regulated ritual. Recitations of ritual formulae, hymns and rhythmical acclamations, sometimes in the form of a dialogue, constituted the imperial liturgy. On the eve of a solemn ceremony, meticulous instructions were given to all participants. The ceremonial garb emphasized the sacred and eternally elevated role that the imperial court was meant to play in the cosmic order. Pearls, precious stones and the palatial architecture expressed the *majestas* of the state. The imperial images reflected the position of the emperor in relation to public law, *ius publicum*. They became the object of the same expressions of honour as the emperor himself and participated in the same manifestations of the official law.

In the imperial cult of the army, the *laureata* played an important role as statues in the sanctuaries, as images on the banners and flags, carried by so-called *imaginiferi*. The right to carry an imperial image on a banner was a privilege also shared by high court officials. In the opposite case, it was a disgrace to the imperial images on military banners to lose to the enemy in war.

When imperial images appeared in contexts outside the domain of public law, they were considered as an insignium, a personal sign of honour, or a symbol of imperial power delegated to high court officials. Only the *consules ordinarii* had the official right to carry the imperial image on the sceptre. After the fall of the Roman Empire, this right was conferred on the Byzantine emperor. The imperial portraits could be fixed on the *tablion* of the *chlamys*, as is seen on the ivory portrait of Ariadne carrying the image of Leo II as consul, in 474, on the imperial diptych no. 51 in the Bargello museum in Florence, or on the *skaranikon*, the high, sumptuously decorated headgear worn by the *archontes*, with the image of an emperor seated on the throne in frontal pose in the front and a standing emperor on the back.

André Grabar has demonstrated that the imperial iconography depended on the absence or presence of the image of Christ. In front of Christ, the emperor could only be depicted standing or in *proskynesis*.

In spite of the fact that only a few emperors and empresses in Byzantium were officially canonized as saints (e.g. Constantine the Great, his mother Helen, Irene and Theodora, the two empresses who restored the cult of images in the 8th and 9th centuries and the Hungarian princess Irene, John II Komnenos' wife), all emperors and empresses appear with a nimbus on the following types of portraits:

1. On coronation portraits, where Christ or the Theotokos is crowning the couple to the sacred imperial dignity (e.g. the ivory diptych representing Romanos IV and Eudokia (1068-71) wearing the heavy *loros* costume in Cabinet des médailles, Paris).
2. On gold or lead seals, attached to written documents in order to sanction their authenticity and legal validity (e.g. the seal of gold of John VIII Paleologos on a *Chrysobullus logos*, Vatopedi Monastery, Mount Athos ca. 1430).

³ M. II Paleologos, *Præcepta educationis regiae*. PG 156, 323-324: Ὅσει σοὶ Θεὸς ἀγαθὸν, ἔχειν μὲν τὸ σκήπτρον ἐκείθεν ἐπισταμένῳ, δοῦλον δὲ σαυτὸν ἐκείνου σαφῶς εἰδῶτι, καὶ τῇ δουλείᾳ τῇ πρὸς ἐκείνου χαίρουσι μᾶλλον, ἢ τῷ βασιλεύειν τῶν ἄλλων.

3. On insignia added to treaties and sent to foreign sovereigns in order to confirm the legal validity of a treaty, or on insignia worn by high court officials as a sign of a delegated imperial power (e.g. the portrait on the skaranikon worn by Grand Primicier John on the Pantocrator icon, dated 1363, in the Hermitage).

4. On portraits representing the emperor in majesty – *majestas domini* – standing, seated on the throne or in frontal group portraits, and in rare cases, in an equestrian image of triumph, the imperial *adventus* (e.g. the ivory diptych of Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington D. C.).

5. On portraits of donors, where the imperial couple presents generous gifts to churches or monasteries (e.g. the mosaics of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople).

When we find a portrait of a *basileus* in majesty formula on a vestment worn by a high ecclesiastical dignitary not at the Byzantine but at the Russian court of the Grand Prince of Moscow in the late Palaiologan era, on the so-called “Grand Sakkos” of Metropolitan Photios, a number of interesting questions arise. Why is the emperor depicted and what is the significance of the imperial portrait in this context? Why does the Russian metropolitan, although Greek by birth, wear an imperial portrait on his vestment? What do the postures of the depicted persons imply? Why do some have a nimbus and others do not? Are they portrait-like in a modern sense? Are their costumes significant? Where do the Byzantine and Russian portraits fall within their own traditions? Where was the vestment created? Who commissioned the precious work in textile?

Before we try to deal with these difficult and ambiguous questions, let us compare the charming portrait of the young, unbearded John VIII Paleologos (1425-1444), born as Porphyrogennetos in 1392, and co-emperor of his father Manuel II (1391-1425), on a frontispiece illumination in the Louvre manuscript Ivoire A 53, dated around 1407, when John was 15 years of age (fig. 1.), with his adolescent portrait (he has a tiny beard) at the side of his co-empress Anne of Moscow (1403-1417), daughter of Grand Prince Vassili I Dimitrievich (1371-1425) (fig. 2.). Later portraits of John on lead seals, golden seals, coins and illuminations (fig. 3., 4.) vary in their degree of schematicism. A true portrait-like depiction is seen on the medallion made by Pisanello on the occasion of John’s visit to the council of Ferrara-Florence in 1437-39. On the medallion, John is depicted in profile with beautiful hair-curls, wearing the *skiadion* on his head. This is a masterpiece of Renaissance portraiture, and a model for the portrait made in 1480 by Bellini of the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II Fatih.⁴ Another portrait by Benozzo Gozzoli, in the fresco of the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence, shows John mounted on a white horse. Filarete made a bronze statue of John’s head.

In comparison with the members of the family of the Russian Grand Prince, on the Grand Sakkos, John has distinctive Greek features. The other three are different physiognomic types. Sofia Vitovtovna, daughter of the Lithuanian Prince Vitovt, and her daughter Anne Vasilievna are pale blondes with big eyes and full lips, apparently the Russian ideal of female beauty, in contrast with the Byzantine geometrical ideal of over-dimensional eyes and thin lips.

John is represented in the traditional posture of *basileus* in majesty when in the presence of Christ, the supreme ruler; he is wearing a helmet-like Palaiologan crown, the *kamealukion*, a dark *sakkos* and jewel-adorned *loros*, attached to the garment with its end hanging over the left arm.

⁴ This medallion belongs to the collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. T. Velmans, “Le portrait dans l’art des Paléologues”, *Art et société à Byzance sous les Paléologues*, (Venice, 1971), 93-148; I. Spatharakis, *The Portrait in Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts*, (Leiden, 1978), D. and T. Talbot Rice, *Icons and Their Dating*, (London, 1974), D. Talbot Rice, *Byzantine Painting, the Last Phase*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1968); E. Piltz, *Kamelaukion et mitra. Insignes byzantins impériaux et ecclésiastiques, Acta universitatis Upsaliensis*, series Figura n.s. 15, 1978; eadem: *Trois sakkoi byzantins*, Figura 17, 1976, et supplements, Figura 19, 1981, pp. 469-479, *Le costume officiel des dignitaires byzantins à l’époque Paléologue*, Figura 26, 1994.

He is holding a scepter in his right hand and the *akakia* as a sign of humble attitude in his left hand, with his foot on the *suppediton*. His eyes are facing straight forward. So far the composition is strictly Byzantine.

The inscription, like that of Anne of Moscow, is in Greek. According to the sources,⁵ his child bride, Anne, was prepared to leave Moscow in 1411 at the age of eight, to marry John in Constantinople. The marriage took place in 1414, when Anne was 11 years old. This little Russian princess became the victim of the plague and died in Constantinople in the autumn of 1417; she was buried in the Libus monastery.⁶ Sultan Beyazid's son, a hostage at the Byzantine court, died in the same plague.

In 1414, John was crowned co-emperor. On this occasion, Emperor Manuel withdrew the crown from the bride, Anne, because of her age. This important information given by Ducas is of obvious significance for the interpretation of her portrait on the vestment. During Manuel's visit to the Peloponnesos 1414-1416, John was left as regent in Constantinople. Between 1416 and 1418, he served as despot of the Morea. It seems unlikely that Anne would have followed him there.

The depiction of Anne's head is without doubt portrait-like. Her costume is modeled on the male, as is that of Saint Helen, above to the right on the same side of Photius' *sakkos*. This is an oddity. Usually empresses do not wear *loros*-bands falling over the left arm (*cf.* Empress Helen's costume on the Ivoire A 53 frontispiece illumination). Anne points with her left hand to her consort, though her eyes are turned towards Christ in the centre. All figures on the whole *sakkos* are outlined in pearls and do not ever touch the lower or top pearl border. They are placed in harmony with the surrounding space.

This principle does not hold for the two grand princely figures. They seem to have been added within their frames when the vestment was completed. They extend over the frames, their crowns collide with the frame and their feet stand bare on the ground. Their inscriptions are in Slavonic and round dots are added to fill out the surrounding space as a kind of *horror vacui*. They both lack nimbuses and Vassili seems to have been compensated for that by having his scepter adorned with pearls. Vassili is about forty-five years of age and his dark, full beard is divided into two parts. He makes a gesture of adoration and turns his eyes towards the centre.

The most interesting portrait is that of Sofia Vitovtovna. For the sake of symmetry, she turns her eyes towards the onlooker and thus becomes as important as the emperor, while she directs both her hands in adoration of Christ in the middle. Her posture is identical with that of Irene-Ingegerd in the Ktitor-cycle of Saint Sophia in Kiev. Her cloak has the same crosses in circles as we see on all male *sakkoi* on the vestment, a typical Greek ornament deriving from the vestment called a *polystavron*.

⁵ "Патриаршая или Никоновская летопись". *Полное собрание русских летописей*. М., т. 11, 1965, 217-218: "И потомъ совѣтъ сотвори князь велики Василей Дмитреевич со отцемъ своимъ Фотѣемъ митрополитомъ о дщери своей Аннѣ, юже хоташе дати въ Греки въ Костянтинѣградъ за царевича Ивана, Мануилова сына; Фотѣй же митрополитъ благоволи ему тако быти и благослови его. - Того же лѣта князь велики Василей Дмитреевич отдаде дщерь свою княжну Анну въ Царѣградъ за царевича Ивана Мануиловича." D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Inheritance of Eastern Europe*, (London, 1982), vol. 10, 140-146.

⁶ Ducas, "Historia Byzantinae," 20, *PG* CLVII 1866, 873: "Ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς Μανουὴλ ἐν ἀδείᾳ ὦν, καὶ μὴ ἔχων τὸν παρεμποδίζοντα, ἐβουλήθη γάμους ποιῆσαι τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ Ἰωάννῃ. Καὶ στείλας εἰς τὸν ῥῆγα Ῥωσίας ἡγάγετο νύμφην τὴν θυγατέρα αὐτοῦ. Καὶ ἀρμόσας ταύτην, μετακαλέσας τὸ ὄνομα αὐτῆς Ἄνναν, οὐκ ἠβουλήθη στέψαι τότε εἰς βασιλέα [βασιλίδα]: ἦν γὰρ ἡ κόρη τὸ ἐνδέκατον ἄγουσα ἔτος· περαιουμένων δὲ τριῶν ἐτῶν, καὶ λοιμικῆς νόσου καταλαβοῦσης τῆ πόλει, καὶ πολὺ πλῆθος λαοῦ διὰ τοῦ βουβῶνος τεθνηκότος, ἐτελεύτησε καὶ ἡ βασιλῆς Ἄννα, μέγα πένθος καταλιποῦσα τοῖς πολίταις.

G. Phrantzes, *Chronicon maius*, 1, *PG* CLVI 1866, 727: Ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ ἔαρι καὶ θέρει λοιμοῦ γεγονότος ἐν τῇ Κωνσταντινουπόλει ἀπέθανε καὶ ἡ δέσποινα κυρὰ Ἄννα ἡ ἀπὸ Ῥωσίας λοιμῶδες νόσῳ, καὶ ἐτάφη ἐν τῇ τοῦ Λιβὸς μονῆ. C. Diehl, *Figures byzantines*, vol. 2, (Paris, 1908), 272-293; J. W. Barker, *Manuel II Paleologus (1391-1425)*, (New Brunswick, NJ, 1969), 32-33.

Metropolitan Photios' figure is placed at the right of the emperor. His face is young and portrait-like, and he appears to be about thirty years old. He has a nimbus. The figures on the Ktitor-cycle in Kiev from the twelfth century do not.

What are the conclusions to be drawn? The portrait of John gives delegated imperial power to the bearer of the costume. If Anna was never crowned co-empress formally, how is it that she wears imperial regalia? Some years later, Sophie of Montferrat, John's second wife, was crowned co-empress by Manuel in a ceremony on 19 February 1421. He repudiated her and she returned to Italy and entered a monastery. We tend to believe that Anne's dress and inscription has the same conventional importance as John's inscription on the Louvre illumination, due to the fact that the co-empress was also regarded as *basilissa* before the official coronation⁷. In the jurisdictional controversy between the oecumenical patriarchate and the Lithuanian Prince Vitold about the see of Kiev, at that time situated on Lithuanian territory, the Byzantine emperor was identified as pro-Lithuanian in Moscow, and that seems to be the ultimate reason why, during the time of Photios' predecessor Cyprian⁸ (also a native Greek, who finally became recognized as metropolitan of Kiev and All Russia), for a certain time the mentioning of the emperor's name was omitted in the Russian liturgical prayers. Vassili made peace with Lithuania and married the daughter of Vitold. We have already pointed out the important position given to her in the vestment portrait gallery. It is, as a matter of fact, she who invites the onlooker to adore Christ in this hesychastic vision, illustrated with the help of satin and pearls, in an expression of the Christian doctrine in the Orthodox Greek language. The Greek seems to have been used for the creed, although this metropolitan served in Russia, to emphasize the primacy of the oecumenical patriarchate over Moscow.

As an imperial insignium worn by the highest official ecclesiastical authority in Russia, who had served as a personal diplomat also in the matrimonial union between the Byzantine and Russian courts, where the Russian prince is included in the Byzantine "family of princes," with his distinctive Boyar insignia, it is more likely that the gift served both the interests of the church and the Grand Prince in relation to the emperor.

In the capacity of insignium, this vestment emphasized in particular Photios' authority in Moscow over the Kievan see and supported the Greek dogma against the heresies. The Greek metropolitans were constantly involved in fund-raising activity in Moscow, for the rescue of the threatened Byzantine Empire. Part of the money given by Vassili was perhaps sent to Constantinople, with a commission to glorify both Photios and his own family.

Created in the imperial work-shops when the depicted persons were alive, the portraits of Vassili and Sofia, with their Slavonic inscriptions, seem to have been added after the vestment arrived in Moscow. In the summer of 1415, an ecclesiastical embassy was sent to Moscow⁹. Photios arrived in Moscow in 1418¹⁰. Anne's portrait was a precious reminiscence for her parents of her glory at the Byzantine court. It was modeled on her face and presented to her parents, who would never see her again. If we do not take the portraits as accurate portrayals, we underestimate the mentality of the Middle Ages.

⁷ Cf. J. M. Sausterre. "A propos des titres d'empereur et de roi dans le haut moyen âge," *Byzantion* LXI, 1991, 15-43.

⁸ D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, (New York, Washington, 1971), 237-271, "The Byzantine Inheritance," XI, pp. 84-87, "A philorhomaïos anthropos," XVII, 15-16.

⁹ F. Dölger, *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden*, (Munich, Berlin, 1924), nr. 3350, 120.

¹⁰ "Никоновская летопись," 212-213: "Тоѣ же весны пресвященный Фотѣй митрополит Киевскій и всея Русїи, иже поставленъ во Царѣградѣ въ лѣто 6917 блаженнымъ Матѣемъ патриархомъ Цареградскимъ, при Мануилѣ царѣ Цареградскомъ и на Русїи при великомъ князи Василии Дмитреевичѣ Московскомъ, и изъ Царяграда прииде въ Киевъ и на всю Русь въ лѣто 6918, мѣсяца Сентября въ 1 день, и ис Кїева прииде на Москву мѣсяца Апрѣля, на самъ Великъ день Христова Вскресенїа."