

NOTES ON MAIN IMAGE CONCEPTS IN THE CULT
OF EMPEROR IN BYZANTIUM

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Abstract: *The present study is an attempt to synthesize the main concepts of Byzantine imperial ideology and to reveal how they have contributed to build the image of the ideal emperor, image reflected in the art of the time. Analyzing the heritage of Antiquity, Christian theology, Byzantine mentalities and the image of the emperor, the study fits in the issues of iconology, of arts and politics and theory of medieval art. Its purpose is to enrich the conceptual documentation on this matter, a useful base to any art historian that deals with the study of Byzantine art, and particularly imperial. Also, the study reveals that many aspects of the cult of the monarch and his image are common in the medieval East and West.*

Keywords: Byzantine art, imperial cult, emperor

Argument

It is known that medieval art history, since Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, considers as *sine qua non* for the practice of the discipline, the method of image investigation by revealing its cultural backgrounds, method established by the two mentioned historians and called *iconology*. Although the method was invented for and applied on Western art, it is obvious that also the Byzantine art studies, which have experienced a significant development during the last century, have benefited from it. The iconology, although challenged as a valid artistic research method (it only reveals aspects that have influenced art, but not its essence, its style, its aesthetic aspects, etc.), is very useful especially in the study of medieval art, an art which was in the service of theological dogmas and of political and social ideologies. The Byzantine art has been serving the Christian dogma, but also was significantly influenced by the mentalities and intentions of its most important Maecenas, the emperors, therefore, of imperial ideology. André Grabar's older study on the emperor in the Byzantine art [1], a study of iconography, requires, at more than seventy years after its first publication, some additions. Today, the interdisciplinary approach by iconological studies, semiotics, thorough researches of the relationship between image and concept, come to enrich our perception and imaging of the Byzantine era.

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Imperial cult, established in Rome by Augustus, was imported in Byzantium by Constantine and survived in all its rites until the fall of Constantinople. In fact, the doctrine of the divine essence was deeply rooted in the imperial institution, because in the pagan Rome, the consecration of the emperor was considered as an *apotheosis* (deification) [2]. Before Constantine, the worship of a man was one of the main obstacles in reconciling Christianity with the secular power. Only after the church was legally recognized, it respected this cult to the extent as it could reconcile with Christian dogmas. By raising over a faithful man and

recognizing in him a man of Providence, but at the same time, a believer in God, a champion of Orthodoxy, the Church was confirming him a sacrosanct authority.

The imperial idea was based on the ancient dichotomy of prototype versus individual, inherited also by the medieval political ideology. Ernst Kantorowicz was the first to examine, in the political matter, the antinomy of natural / political body as the two bodies of the monarch, which incorporated a single person and formed a single body [3]. The body politic is higher, wider and broader than the natural body, and the effect exerted by it in the monarch's natural body, being active as a *Deus absconditus*, is that the king becomes a person with which no other man is equal (see, also, Louis Marin's paradox: „the king's representation/ the king of representation”) [4]. This ancient antinomy is inherited in medieval concept of mixed *persona*: there are allegedly types and mixtures of different capacities, and this “medieval game” is found under any condition. The junction between two heterogeneous spheres for which the middle Ages have a special attraction, are born from the desire of reconciling the world's dualities: temporary / eternal, secular / spiritual, *natura / gratia*. The mixture consists mainly in spiritual and secular, abstract powers united in one single person (e.g. the western medieval mixture of monk-knight). Thus, appears the medieval political concept of the abstract physiological fiction of the monarch's person, who is immortal (his title belongs to him also after his death) or does not have a legal age (his children inherit the political *charisma*). At the limit, it means that the monarch is unable to commit mistakes, being the source of the justice, in him there isn't any weakness [5]. The monarch is the “Fountain of Justice”, and his ubiquity and legal status of absolute perfection confers him a superhuman character. Seneca spoke of *Imperator Deus in terris, Deus in praesens*. A paradox occurs: the emperor is not bound by laws (*legibus solutus*), but he is the main servant of Justice.

Both medieval East and West exalted the “angelic character” of the monarch, which is, in fact, a concept of both Biblical and Hellenistic origins [6]. The ancient concept of the wise king, who belongs to a third distinct class, between gods and men, is continued. King's figure represents a continuum, beyond contingency and corruption. His body politic is alike to angels and spirits and represents, like the angels, the immutable in time. This concept was built in the Jewish culture on biblical sources: „the king, my lord is wise, as wise as the angel of God” (II Kings, 14:20).

Imperial theology

The aureole of the Byzantine emperor refers to his *genius imperatoris*, to the perpetual imperial power, which, although is a pagan symbol, it can be venerated also in the Christian sense. When it comes to saint emperors, as Constantine, the nimbus does not refer to the affiliation of this emperor in the category of saints, but indicates his political power, derived from God. The imperial aureole could indicate, in different cases, also a change in the nature of time: the person involved in a halo participated to a different category of Time from that determined by the natural world [7]: the holder of this halo is vicar of a more general prototype which participates to an endless continuum, called the middle Ages *aevum*. *Aevum* is the habitat of ideas, *logoi* or Prototypes, in which the monarch is mediator [8]. Monarchs are, thus, temporary holders of the divine prototypes.

This concept makes the emperor the incarnation of a prototype which is immortal and sacred, regardless of character or gender. Empress Irene is such an example (although unique), being called in official documents as *Eirene pistos basileus*. However, in Byzantium the empresses' role was mainly to legitimize the new reign, by the birth of sons or matrimonial alliances. The legitimacy of reign, although operating in the frames of electivity, rather than by the hereditary principle, is an important ideology in Byzantium. The connections with the predecessors or even earlier dynasties are carefully cultivated. Also, if the emperor died, leaving a minor heir, the empress became regent. Empresses facilitate transfer of power from one monarch to another, keeping the throne in the family [9]. Another important role of the empress was to participate in imperial ceremonies and to be founder and benefactor to monastic foundations [10].

The anointing of the emperor has the same effect as the baptism [11]: this act removes all sins and crimes of earlier life of the future monarch [12]. The apparition of emperor in processions was seen as a *teophania* (or *prokypsis* - apparition) [13]. Despite that the papal doctrine denied the clerical attributes of kings in the West, most medieval authors exalted the spiritual qualities of the monarch, because of their anointment [14]. The body of the king is seen as the tabernacle or temple of the Holy Spirit. The hand of God (*dextera Dei*) is in contact with the monarch's head, at the coronation. Most Byzantine representations of emperors from the 9th to 15th centuries, but also many Carolingian and Ottonian miniatures represent the monarch being crowned or blessed by the hand of God. In some earlier representations on consular diptychs (4th-6th cent.), the emperor appears seating on the throne, above consuls [15].

The attribute "*Theios*" (godly) is given to anything which comes in connection with the emperor. Thus, any impairment of the imperial order takes the appearance of a sacrilege and is considered a conspiracy against God and true faith. Democracy means a sacrilege against the emperor, which is the only authority recognized by God. The revolts which ended with the excommunication of emperor were considered on the same plan with apostasy [16]. By mid-century the 12th century, the leader of state is still qualified with the attributes of "holy" and "divine", as in ancient Rome, he is a genuine cult object. From the ancient tradition comes also the concept of sacerdotal valences of the emperor, *Pontifex maximus*. In Byzantium, the concept was not abolished very soon, so that at the synod of Chalcedon (451), emperor Marcianus is still acclaimed by the words "long live the emperor and priest" [17]. By mid 5th century, no religious ceremony does mark the ascension to the throne; there are only military operations, which proclaim him and raise him on the shield. But the coronation and the recognition by the patriarch become in a short time necessary, so that will be considered as legitimate only the monarch crowned by the patriarch. The religious rites become more important than the military rites, which remain, however, in parallel.

Some political "rites" and meanings were borrowed, during 8th-9th centuries, from the Sassanid court. The most important is prostration (*proskinesis*) before the emperor or imperial couple and its image, worship which is acted almost like a liturgy [18]. But the term of *proskinesis* should not be understood fully by its Latin correspondent, *adoratio*, which is reserved only to divinity. This translation was the main source of misunderstanding the Byzantine imperial cult by the West. It is noted that the Christian martyrs, during surplices, considered the worship of the emperor's images as idolatry, but it didn't mean that they didn't

have any respect for the portraits of the emperor or for his person, which was considered as a natural attitude. This cult was dedicated also to the empress. Some legal texts speak in principle, of veneration of “porphyry”, thus, of the veneration of the whole imperial family. This honor was broadening also to dignitaries close to emperor, operating in accordance with the concept of “radiating aura” of power.

Imperium and sacerdotium

The king is a double person - one descended from nature and the other from grace, so, especially in the West he is assimilated to a *vicarius Christi* and later to a *vicarius Dei* - the divinity of the monarchy being placed even above Christ’s humanity, as Tiberius Cesar acted besides Christ the Man. This concept is found in late Middle Ages in the conservation of the portrait of emperors, idealized, sumptuously ornate, static, impassive, ultimately a typological scheme, while the sacred persons expresses tenderness or pain relatively individualized [19]. There is a difference of order between bishop and king. While Christ was Priest and Lord, in the medieval conception the priesthood acts as *officium* and *typos* of a lower nature, the human one, and the monarchy as the *officium* of a superior nature, divine [20]. In images, this differentiation of functions and rank is relieved by the symbolism of left-right: the bishop is usually represented on the left side of the monarch, e.g. at San Vitale, the Gospel of Aachen, etc.

In the West, the emperor was anointed by the pope [21]. The Pope had a higher rank and higher charisma above all bishops, while in the Orient, the Patriarch and bishops were equal in charismas. The Western society was built as a pyramid on top of which was the Pope and the church was organized as a social system, so the Pope gradually develops the idea that he delegates the politic charisma, which belongs to him. Pope becomes a source of legitimacy, as Vicar of Christ and descendant of St. Peter. It is born, thus, the typical dispute between the West, regarding *sacerdotium* and *imperium*. On 25 December 800, when Pope crowned the Roman Emperor Charles the Great, it was an absolute innovation, which became a main source of conflict with Byzantium.

However, Byzantium was highlighted an absolute separation between *imperium* and *sacerdotium*, separation that worked effectively [22]. The emperor’s privilege to remain in the church altar during the liturgy was abolished even in Constantinople after the 9th century, as states Constantine Porphyrogenet. Byzantine emperor was God’s man, he was chosen from people to govern them. He was a providential man, not just a delegate of the Patriarch and, also providentially, he could be bad for the empire, as payment for the sins of the people. The Byzantines cultivated, especially in the last period of the Empire, troubled and full of loss, a theology of failure. In the church hierarchy, the emperor could be, at most, a sort of deacon, but the Patriarch was subject to the emperor in the political aspects. In the matter of charismatic investitures, the emperor had no power. The imperial power itself was given to the emperor from Christ, through the patriarch. In the official Byzantine iconography, the crown is offered to the emperor by Christ or an angel, symbolizing the divine origin of the power. In fact, the origin of the power is at the patriarch, who blesses and puts the crown on the head of the monarch. In institutional language, the Patriarch gives emperor the power [23]. In the moment of coronation, the Patriarch is the only agent of Christ, so that its eventual

refuse makes the legalization of the imperial power impossible. However, the emperor can excommunicate the patriarch for nuisance towards the Church. In the lists of dignities, the Patriarch occupied a second place, while the head position of the emperor was never challenged. In respect to the sacred person of the emperor, it is significant that there was never anathematized an emperor for heresy, as if the sentences of the church could not touch the monarchs. However, the emperors, at the coronation, must declare the Orthodox Credo (since 491), and this statement becomes a preliminary condition for investment [24].

The Roman tradition of close relation between *sacerdotium* and *imperium* remain tight in the Eastern and Western Christian cultures. It must be said that, in Byzantium, the imperial ritual provided the exterior appearance of the church ceremonies, especially after the end of Iconoclastic crisis. Also, in the iconography, the representation of Moses and Aaron together signified this close collaboration between *sacerdotium* and kingship, the monarch and the priest, this being the icon of the good governance.

The emperor was especially acclaimed in the Church councils. The Church had, in fact, a fundamental contribution in strengthening the official concept of emperor. There was often highlighted by scholars a kind of “Cesar-papist” ideological problem in Byzantium. However, there is rather a theocracy where the emperor exercised the power in the Church, given him by God. Therefore, the idea of Patriarchy and the empire were intimately linked. Thus, Bulgarians, Serbs and Russians have fought to obtain first a Patriarchy, which could anoint their tsar and provide power. However, Church’ obedience to the civil power made it lose little by little the awareness of its true nature. This led to the formation of national Churches, opposed the Evangelical idea of uniform Church, where all its disciples are grouped together. In this sense, religious policy of the *basileis* was a cause for schism.

But also interesting is the fact that the imperial concept adopted by Church after the triumph of Orthodoxy, went also to situations of challenge of the imperial authority by the patriarchs, as is the case of Patriarch Michael Kerularios, who arrogated oneself the right to wear imperial signs (the imperial red shoes), stating that he was following a principle which was deduced from Scripture: “And God has appointed in the Church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues” (I Corinthians, 12:28). The Scriptures say that the forms of leadership are inferior to the priesthood, so patriarchal authority must be, undoubtedly, over the imperial one [25].

Byzantine church was formed by two elements: the “imperial” church and the monkhood [26]. The imperial (*i.e.* administrative) church had a managerial division following the empire’s administrative divisions by the principle of accommodation of the Church institution to the structures of the state: Metropolitan seat, diocese and bishopric are terms of administrative vocabulary, firstly adopted by the Romans from the ancient Greeks. “Imperial” church is administrative, not charismatic - where is no hierarchy between bishops. This “administrative” church is dependent on the emperor and political fluctuations. In the 12th century, the canonist Theodor Balsamon concluded that the emperor is above the ecclesial law, since he granted dispensations to clerics. Emperors have the right to decide on ecclesial constituencies, to create the bishoprics and to amend statutes. They legislate on election of clergy, about their rights, duties and on monastic rules of life, the duration of novitiate. The emperors also interfered in liturgical life. Justin I sets throughout the empire December the

25th for the Nativity Day. Justinian sets the date February the 2nd for Candlemas and Mauritius the 15th of August for the Assumption of the Mother of God. Mauritius also sets a week of special processions dedicated to the Virgin at the church of Blachernai. Basil I creates the holiday of St. Elias and sets it on the 20th of July. Constantine Monomachos decides that the Liturgy should be taken daily at St. Sofia [27].

The second constitutive element of the Church is the monkhood. In Eastern Orient and in Constantinople, the monasteries were acting almost like urban centers and their influence in the empire grew stronger over the centuries. Monks were those who, despite the obedient attitude of the metropolitan bishops, criticized the interference of the emperors in the Church problems. St. John Damascene, who lived in the monastery of Saint Sabbas, near Jerusalem, *i.e.* outside the Empire, stated that sovereigns should not intervene in matters of faith, because this matter belonged to the Church councils and statesmen have no right to legislate in the Church [28]. Maxim the Confessor also answers a bishop in the same spirit [29]. The 10th-14th centuries, the monks are concentrated on the Mount Athos and become a force more redoubtable even than the Patriarchate. Monks' force was redoubtable especially in the issue of union with Rome, as they were radically opposed to any innovations of the Western church. Almost all Paleologi emperors have signed treaties of union with Rome, but they could not put them into practice because of the monks, who were respected by people. It is also well known that every Orthodox prince had the duty to be *evergetes* or founder at Mt. Athos.

Imperial Victory

The emperor's main mission from God was to ensure the victory for the empire. It is a Christian theology, but of Roman imperial legacy that empire's victory is obtained personally by the basileus, and victory comes as a protective deity. The Roman *Victoria Augustii* is a principle which will not be waived. It will be absorbed by the angels or the protector saints of the basileus in the Byzantine period. The Christian cross will become the main symbol of victory and also the essential attribute of the kingdom: it is the trophy of victory [30].

There is a great rhetoric in Byzantium related to the almightiness of the emperor, "master of land and sea and of all mankind, lord sacred and impregnable", "your word is feared, mighty *basileus* and master of land and sea, master of life which you can take or save, your power covers us all" (discourse of John Mauropous, bishop of Euchaita, at the coronation of Constantine Monomachos) [31].

Renovatio

Another concept closely related to the emperor's powers is the *renovatio (epanorthosis)*. Each emperor / king is praised for having built, renewed and made cities bloom. There is a whole rhetoric of the renewals made by emperors and kings [32]. In this respect, the chronicles are recording carefully the emperors' building work [33].

The concept of *novus / neos* in late Antiquity and middle Ages is illustrative for the ancient and medieval mentality on the tradition / innovation: innovation is valuable if means the rebirth of a golden era, maintaining the tradition uninterrupted. It is a concept very different from the modern Renaissance - which is produced by dislocating an obsolete cultural

structure - mentality non-existent in Byzantium. It should be noted that in Byzantium, this “renewal” of a monument, for example, is often made by reusing *spolia* from older monuments. There are often renewed mainly older foundations. The concept of “new” in Byzantium hadn’t at all the modern connotation of original and genuine, devoid of a past, but more the meaning of renovation, of revival of a venerable past, or of *translatio* of a model (mainly from Constantinople to the provinces of the empire or even outside it), of imitation (*mimesis*) of ancient models and iconographic schemes [34].

Constantinople is new Rome, the church is the New Jerusalem and the emperors are *Novus Constantinus*, *Novus David* or *Novus Solomon* [35]. The Emperor is compared often also with the heroes of Antiquity: Achilles, Alexander the Great or Hercules [36], but also with the pagan gods: he is *Neos Dionysos* or *Neos Helios*. There are many reminiscences of the solar cult of the Romans (*Sol Invictus*) in the comparisons of the emperor with the sun in the Byzantine encomia. Also in the imperial ceremonies at the palace of Blahernai the emperor’s figure was strongly brightened. So, none of the older traditions are lost, but they are significantly transfigured.

Emperor *Kosmokrator* and *Kronokrator*

In Byzantium, the notions of order (*taxis*) and economy (*oikonomia*) cover all the virtues and principles which determine the creation and, in this respect, should lead the Church and State. They have the value of universal principles. The order was considered in Byzantium as irreversible and was maintained at any cost by imperial and ecclesiastical measures. *Taxis* played the role in Byzantium comparative to that of the concept of *metron* in antiquity and *oikonomia* was comparable to *sophia* or *phronesis* of ancient Greece. *Taxis* became to express the main universal principle of the Byzantine world. The laws and rules were dictated by the closest to perfection “economy” and aimed to guarantee the supreme good for all people. The *oikonomia* was guaranteed by the wise emperor and patriarch, seeking to obtain the final order of the Byzantine politics and civilization- *Pax Byzantina* [37].

The Byzantines considered the world (civilized!) as a cosmos: an aesthetic ornament, an organized world, an order. This perfectly organized universe creates an *oikoumene* (community), has a *taxis* (order) and an *oikonomia* (principle of adapting to circumstances, “fair consideration”, caution). There is a strict hierarchy, all subject to the emperor, whom is given the qualification *Kosmokrator* (master of the world, of cosmos), and, more surprisingly, *Kronokrator* (Time Master), *Pantokrator* being only Christ.

Emperor *isapostolos*

When Rome became a Christian empire, Constantine’s mission became providential, of dominating all nations, spreading the Christianity and establishing the Kingdom of Christ on earth. The emperor / king became thus, a genuine apostle. Constantine was given the title of *isapostolos* (equal to the apostles) so that his successors could already claim it, too. This title remains active until the end of Byzantium, yet Anna the Comnene said about her father that he was “the thirteenth apostle” [38].

Emperor *Hristomimetes*

After the Incarnation of Christ and the Ascension of the Lord in glory, the royalty has undergone a consistent change in its essence and signification, acquiring its own office in the economy of Salvation. The kings of Old Testament were forerunners of Christ, bodily elders of Him. After the Incarnation, the kings became images, imitators of Christ. The Christian leader becomes *Hristomimetes* (imitator of Christ) [39]. The monarch is, thus, *imago Christi* on earth. His office is more than a functional capacity and institutional competence, it is a liturgical action, and *imago Christi* is an ontological quality of the king. Ontologically, the monarch is *Imago Christi*, and functionally is *vicarius Christi*. Consequently, the portrait of the king is represented as hieratic, covered by gold and precious stones, like God (*mimesis tou Theou*). The patricians and the ministers should play the role of the apostles, and the emperor, as far as possible, the role of Christ [40].

Representations which show a facial resemblance (*facies*) between Christ and the king intend to show that God is manifest in the king (e.g. Rogerio II crowned by Christ in the church's mosaic of La Martorana, Palermo, 12th century) [41]. According to Tania Velmans, this type of image, manifested in representations signifying church donations or on official documents, replaced or supplemented the formula *in onomati* (in the name of [God]) [42]. The monarch is speaking, but Christ is the person in whose name the establishment is made. The similarity between Christ and the monarch may be morphological or even physiologic (e.g. the miniature in the Gospel of Otto II from Reichenau, representing Otto in a mandorla, ascending into the sky, like Christ). In time, exchanges intervene between both sides, of imperial and religious iconography.

A typical Byzantine mentality was to associate the name of a person with a saintly namesake or to highlight the similarities of some situations with biblical or hagiographical events. For this purpose, transfers took place and were cultivated kindred elements which contributed to the cult of a person, in this case, the emperor. Manuel Comnene used to say that he is like David who, although he was the smallest of Joshua's children, was elected by God to govern [43]. The highest expression of this concept, however, is met in Manuel Comnene's joining of the image of Jesus Emanuel, his patronymic, together with his portrait, on coins. These comparisons to King David and Christ had a strong presence in encomiastic literature of the time.

Isaac II Angelos is a similar case because of his name. His image joins the Archangel Michael in military costume, on the coins. The emperor carries a sword and not a cross or a *labarum*, as the usual representations of the emperors on coins. It is venerated the sword with which, like angels, Isaac Angelos killed the tyrant Andronicus, the former emperor. It is significant that the author of the *enkomion* which praised his military, "angelic" virtues and where the Angeloi genealogy is compared to Jacob's ladder is a bishop, Michael Choniates of Athens [44]. Also for the Paleologan period is characteristic to imagine the order of heavenly kingdom according to the Byzantine court hierarchies. In an *ekphrasis* of the Nativity of the Lord, the metropolitan of Ephesus, Mark Eugenikos compared the Virgin with a queen and Christ with a king to whom the people come to adore [45]. The art historian Evangelia Georgitsoyanni notes that the iconography of the imperial *Deesis* and its emergence throughout the empire and beyond during this period, is a result of a *metaphrasis* in

hesychastic spirit, of the heavenly kingdom, imagined as being like the Byzantine imperial court [46].

The cult of imperial / royal image

The portrait of emperor had the status to replace the monarch's real presence wherever it was. When it was worn in the trial courts, the image was welcomed as the emperor himself. If was found in a court room, the image replaced the sovereign. Image of Emperor was sacred, was greeted with branches and worship anthems were dedicated to it. The portraits of monarchs were found in particular on mobile objects; imperial portraits were often found in paintings, miniatures, ivories, embroidery or coins. On seals and coins, the representation of the monarch is regarded as a guarantee of authenticity and legal effectiveness. The portraits on chrysobuls had the same significance, of legal authentication of donations [47]. Embroidered on the suits of the hierarchs or officials, they are a mark of honor and submission [48].

The monarchy signs constitute the imperial reality, the monarch's being and substance, and this belief is guaranteed by the crown, *globus* and *labarum*. Their rejection means heresy, error and crime. As sacramental body, the monarch is seen under visual and written species: as a historical body, it is visible through the representation, absent become present through image (compare with Leon Battista Alberti: "painting is a divine force that shows the absent present and the dead alike the living", *Della Pittura*, book II), as the body politic he is seen as symbolic fiction, significant with his name, his right, his law [49]. The representation of the portrait is marked by conventionality; it is not aimed the observation of the model, but the idea which corresponds him. In comparison with the portrait, the effigy is more accurate in this kind of relation to the truth. The portrait of sovereign is revealing by adding it ideal, political attributes and symbols [50].

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