

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 ἀέρος 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 [*Milion* 5]); and the *Byzantium: Faith and Power* exhibition catalog 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 Ὀλοβόλου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς Μιχαὴλ Ἡ' Παλαιολόγον," *ΕΕΒΣ*, 3 (1926), 188: δύνатаί Σου καὶ ἡ εἰκῶν, ἂν ἡμῖν παρεῖν, πολλὰ ἀμυντήριον ἔσται κατὰ τῶν ἡμετέρων ἀντιπάλων στερεόν, πάσης ἐπιβουλῆς ἀποτρόπαιον, ἔπαλξις τῆ σῆ καὶ ἡμετέρᾳ πόλει κρατερὰ, προσπύργιον ἰσχυρόν καὶ τεῖχος ἀντικρυς ἀδαμάντινον. 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 ἔχθροὶ 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

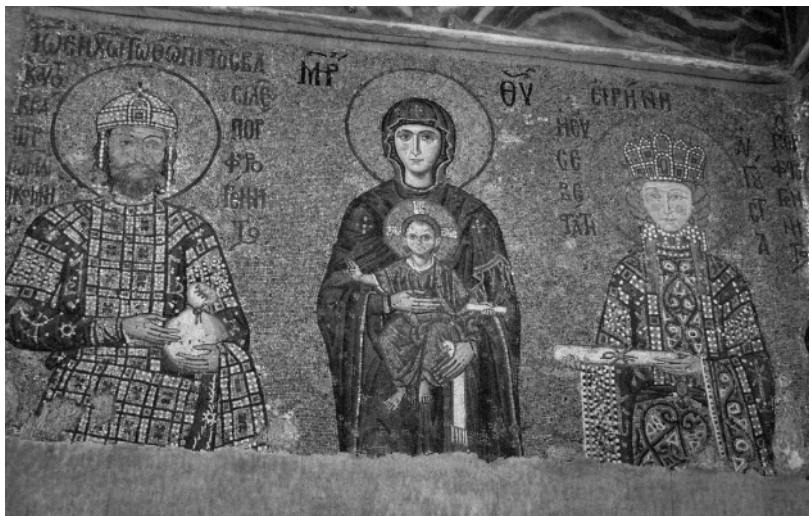


Figure 0.3 John II Komnenos and Eirene with the Virgin and Child, south gallery mosaics, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, twelfth century

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 Prodromos 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,

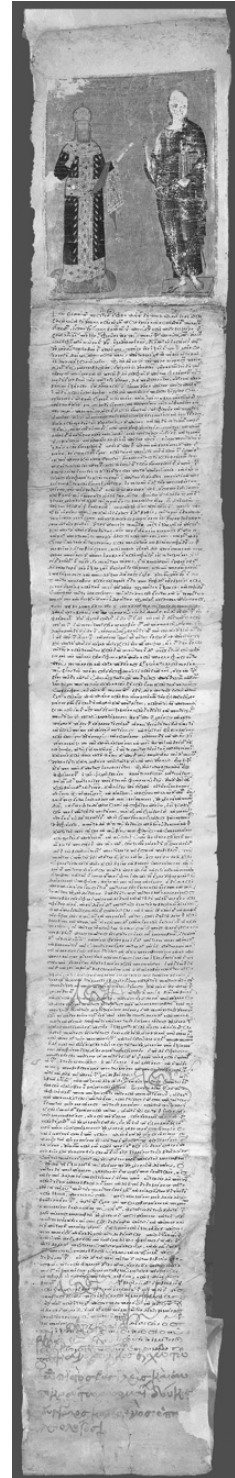


Figure 0.4b

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.

of God of Certain Hope in Constantinople, known as the Lincoln College Typikon, which includes a series of portraits of family members such as Theodore Synadenos wearing precisely this tall headdress adorned with the effigy of the emperor (Figure 0.5).²⁰ It is also depicted on a group of anonymous courtiers in the fresco cycle of the Akathistos Hymn on the eastern wall of the narthex of the Katholikon of the Holy Trinity in Cozia, Valachia (Figure 0.6).²¹ Here a group of dignitaries wearing *skaranika*, which bear a bust-length outline of the emperor, stand behind the emperor himself, who gestures in reverence toward the icon of the Virgin at the center of the composition, which is mounted above an embroidered *podea* echoing an image of the emperor in prayer. Such an image, which takes as its inspiration the twenty-third strophe of the Akathistos, brings together two of Byzantium's most potent images – that of the Virgin and of the emperor – and showcases each of them as worthy of veneration and emulation.

The *skaranikon* served to visualize imperial and courtly authority in clearly legible sartorial terms: it glorified the imperial office by picturing the effigy of the emperor as the source, even the defining feature, of the elevated status of its wearer.²² The imperial image was conceptualized as a privilege to be worn as a symbol of allegiance, precedence, and rank. Only a privileged few were given the honor of wearing the emperor's likeness. Although the emperor's image as a codified sartorial component of the imperial court hierarchy originates in the Palaiologan period, the imperial image was deployed diplomatically much earlier. The emperor's likeness proclaimed his suzerainty both within the empire and within the realm of foreign diplomacy.²³ To offer an imperial image as a gift is to inscribe

²⁰ Bodleian Library, MS. Lincoln College Gr. 35 dating to 1327–42 includes depictions of the *skaranikon* on the following portraits: John Synadenos on folio 2r, John Synadenos on folio 3r, Manuel Asen on 5r, Constantine Raul on folio 6r, and Theodore Synadenos on folio 8r. On this manuscript, see Spatharakis, *The Portrait*, 190–206; Anthony Cutler and Paul Magdalino, “Some Precisions on the Lincoln College Typikon,” *CA*, 27 (1978), 179–98; and Irmgard Hutter, “Die Geschichte des Lincoln College Typikons,” *JÖB*, 45 (1995), 79–114. On the text of the typikon, see *BMGD*, 1512–78.

²¹ On this image and its context, see Gordana Babić, “L'iconographie constantinopolitaine de l'Acatheste de la Vierge à Cozia (Valachie),” *Zbornik Radova Vizantoloskog Instituta (Recueil des Travaux de l'Institut d'Études Byzantines)*, 14–15 (1973), 173–89; and more recently (and with color images), Iohannis Spatharakis, *The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin* (Leiden, 2005), 68–73.

²² In Parani's words (“Cultural Identity and Dress,” 108): “The presence of the imperial portrait indicated not only the source of the authority of the officials but also highlighted their proximity to the emperor.”

²³ In the early Byzantine period, the conversion of the Lazi to Christianity, for example, included the bestowal of a tunic embroidered with an image of the emperor. See Roger Scott, “Diplomacy in the Sixth Century: The Evidence of John Malalas” in Jonathan Shepard and Simon Franklin (eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy: Papers from the Twenty-Fourth Spring Symposium*



Figure 0.5 Portrait of Theodore Komnenos Doukas Synadenos and Wife, Lincoln College Typikon, Bodleian Library, MS. Lincoln College gr. 35, fol. 8r, c. 1327–42

of Byzantine Studies, Cambridge, March 1990 (Aldershot, 1992), 159–65. Moreover, in the eleventh century, an enamel crown with the emperor's image was sent to Hungary. See Cecily J. Hilsdale, "The Social Life of the Byzantine Gift: The Royal Crown of Hungary Re-Invented," *ArtH*, 31(5) (2008), 602–31.



Figure 0.6 Detail of the fresco cycle of the Akathistos Hymn from the Katholikon of the Holy Trinity in Cozia, Valachia

Byzantine hierarchy. It is to prescribe allegiance through an act of seeming generosity, and the logic of this contradiction relates to the hierarchical stakes of gift-giving more broadly.

Historicizing imperial giving

A contradiction lies at the heart of the term “gift.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* emphatically stresses the free and disinterested nature of a gift, but it is here understood as deeply imbued with agendas of hierarchy and reciprocity.²⁴ A gift, in general usage and by definition, is something freely given; it is predicated on a lack of self-interest. Whether property, a thing, an experience, or even personhood itself, a gift is offered in exchange for

²⁴ Portions of the following discussion are drawn from Cecily J. Hilsdale, “Gift,” *Studies in Iconography*, 33 (2012), 171–82, a special issue of the journal, edited by Nina Rowe dedicated to *Medieval Art History Today – Critical Terms*, which assesses the utility of the term “gift” and “prestation” as a critical term for medieval art history.

nothing. Yet anthropologist Marcel Mauss in his *Essai sur le don* famously declared that there could be no free gift and that giving always involves self-interest to a certain degree.²⁵ From a philological-linguistic perspective, Émile Benveniste has traced the ambivalent etymology of the gift in Indo-European language, demonstrating that the languages of giving and taking are intimately related.²⁶ Later Jacques Derrida called the free gift further into question, claiming that there could be no gift at all, let alone a free one: to give always already negates the giving.²⁷

At its core, Mauss's study of the gift represents a commitment to the principle of reciprocity. Cyclical rather than terminal, gifts, for Mauss, instill three obligations: to give, to receive, and to return. Anthropologists and social scientists have taken issue with the spiritual logic of this reciprocal model and in particular with the mechanism compelling reciprocation or the spirit of the thing given. For others, Mauss's work serves as a springboard for related aspects of prestation²⁸ such as debt, expenditure, and largesse. Maurice Godelier, for example, revisits Mauss in order to consider sacred objects that do not circulate, proposing that the logic of such gifts concerns the ungiveable, a proposal similar in many ways to Annette Weiner's examination of inalienable possessions, which were meant to be guarded

²⁵ Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don: Forme et raison d'échange dans les sociétés archaïques," *L'Année sociologique*, n.s. 1 (1923–4), 30–186, reprinted with an introduction by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris, 1950), 145–279, translated by W. D. Halls with foreword by Mary Douglas as *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York, 1990, repr. 2000). Since the *Essai sur le don* first appeared, generations of scholars have re-evaluated Mauss's method, his conclusions, and his larger ideological agenda. No longer limited to the social sciences, ideologies of prestation have been invoked by medievalists within the contexts of literature, philology, immunities, simony, liturgy, inheritance, and more. Three relatively recent collections of essays stand out: Esther Cohen and Mayke B. de Jong (eds.), *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context* (Leiden, 2001); Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner, and Bernhard Jussen (eds.), *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange* (Göttingen, 2003); and Davies and Fouracre (eds.), *The Languages of Gift*. Florin Curta, "Merovingian and Carolingian Gift-Giving," *Speculum*, 81 (2006), 671–99, also represents an important contribution to the debate.

²⁶ Émile Benveniste, "Gift and Exchange in the Indo-European Vocabulary" in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Miami, 1971), also excerpted in Alan D. Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of the Gift: Towards an Ethic of Generosity* (New York, 1997), 33–42. Schrift's volume gathers together a number of important interventions on the gift, including two seminal pieces by Pierre Bourdieu, one of which was written expressly for the volume.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I, Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, 1992). As a representative of new phenomenology in France, see Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, 2002).

²⁸ Drawing on Mauss's understanding of the gift as part of a system of "prestation totale," the term "prestation" is used in this study to "emphasize the critical role of the gift in the creation and maintenance of social structures of reciprocity and bonds of debt and obligation." See Hilsdale, "Gift," 172.

rather than extended as gifts.²⁹ Complicating Mauss's neat cyclicity, Pierre Bourdieu characterizes the gift as a profound articulation of risk by highlighting the associated elements of contingency and implied danger that result from the fundamental uncertainty of whether, what, or when a return or counter-gift will appear.³⁰ He thus reads giving as merely an incomplete gesture, emphasizing that the cyclical nature of the exchange – the paths, logic, and effects of gifts – can only be appreciated fully in retrospect.

Much of our understanding of medieval conceptions of gift exchange is due to the survival of the *Book of Gifts and Rarities* (*Kitab al-Hadaya wa al-Tuhaf*), an Arabic compilation of ceremonial court exchanges.³¹ The language of reciprocity is explicit in Arabic, which exhibits a finely tuned semantic range for expressing gifting. Two different words for “gift” are specified: one signifies a contract with no expectation of return and is used commonly for diplomatic gifts, while a second implies the obligation of a return gift from the recipient. The distinction, in other words, is between conditional and unconditional gifts.³² An often-cited anecdote from this medieval compilation explicates the competitive nature of gift-gifting cross-culturally. The text reports the response to a gift sent by a Byzantine emperor to Caliph al-Ma'mun with the following instructions: “Send him a gift a hundred times greater than his, so that he realizes the glory of Islam and the grace that Allah bestowed on us through it.”³³ This passage confirms

²⁹ Maurice Godelier, *L'énigme du don* (Paris, 1996); and Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley, 1992).

³⁰ Bourdieu builds on *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge, 1990) in “Marginalia – Some Additional Notes on the Gift” in Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of the Gift*, 231–2. Bourdieu's reading of the gift will be further elaborated upon in the Conclusion. One of the more significant recent contributions to the scholarship on gifts concerns the temporal dimension of giving. In response to the gift-versus-commodity debate, on which see Chris Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (London, 1982), Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff have argued for a more fluid model whereby objects can pass in and out of phases of commoditization and gifting. See Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value” in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1996 [1986]), 3–59; and in the same volume Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” 63–90.

³¹ Ghada al-Hijawi al-Qaddumi (ed. and trans.), *Book of Gifts and Rarities (Kitab al-Hadaya wa al-Tuhaf): Selections Compiled in the Fifteenth Century from an Eleventh-Century Manuscript on Gifts and Treasures* (Cambridge, MA, 1996). See Anthony Cutler, “Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab, and Related Economies,” *DOP*, 55 (2001), 247–78; and Anthony Cutler, “Significant Gifts: Patterns of Exchange in Late Antique, Byzantine, and Early Islamic Diplomacy,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 38(1) (2008), 79–101.

³² See al-Qaddumi (ed. and trans.), *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, introduction; as well as Ann Christys, “The Queen of the Franks Offers Gifts to the Caliph al-Mutafi” in Davies and Fouracre (eds.), *The Languages of Gift*, 149–70.

³³ Al-Qaddumi (ed. and trans.), *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, 77. See, however, the cautionary remarks about agonistic giving by Cutler in “Significant Gifts.”

the basic premise advanced by anthropologists that giving is fundamentally agonistic and that it triggers shifts in power and difference. Hierarchy, this passage suggests, is articulated through the transfer of sumptuous presents.

Anthony Cutler has elucidated the dynamics of prestation in the context of this text alongside contemporary Byzantine sources in relation to anthropological theories. Evaluation or assessment, for example, is one point of similarity between the Arabic *Book of Gifts and Rarities* and the roughly contemporaneous Greek compilation of court ceremonial known as the *Book of Ceremonies*.³⁴ In the account of the imperial reception of Olga of Kiev in Constantinople, the Byzantine source emphasizes gift assessment: the text relates how the gift is brought first “to the *magistros* so that he knows what each gift [is worth], so that he will be able to recall to the emperor at the time of the exchange of gifts what he should return through his ambassadors.”³⁵ Diplomatic gifting at the highest level of the imperial administration, this episode suggests, involved careful calculation. Although this Greek text lacks the explicitly agonistic aspect of prestation found in the *Kitab al-Hadaya*, it makes it abundantly clear that gift exchange was strategic and that giving ultimately concerned getting.

The strategic necessity of thinking about gifts in the diplomatic context is elucidated by a tenth-century Byzantine packing list that specifies luxury items to be brought on military expeditions for distribution to foreigners.³⁶ According to the specifications of this prescriptive list, the imperial

³⁴ Michael McCormick, “Analyzing Imperial Ceremonies,” *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Gesellschaft für Byzantinistik*, 35 (1985), 1–20; Averil Cameron, “The Construction of Court Ceremonial: The Byzantine Book of Ceremonies” in D. Cannadine and S. Price (eds.), *Rituals of Royalty. Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1987), 106–36. As Dagron puts it in *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2003), 54, the *Book of Ceremonies* synthesizes “various protocols and, according to the rules of the genre, removing the proper names and dates in order to transform a historical document into a model.”

³⁵ Reiske, *De ceremoniis*, I:89, 407, 7–13 as in Cutler, “Gifts and Gift Exchange,” 257–8, who notes that this particular passage is taken from Peter the Patrician. Matthew Canepa also discusses this passage in *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, 2009), 30–1. Michael Featherstone, “Olga’s Visit to Constantinople in *De Cerimoniis*,” *REB*, 61 (2003), 241–51, productively reassesses the ceremonial terms of Olga’s reception.

³⁶ John F. Haldon, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions* (Vienna, 1990), 108–11. On diplomatic gifts more broadly, see Telemachos Lounghis, *Les ambassades byzantines en Occident: depuis la fondation des états barbares jusqu’aux Croisades (407–1096)* (Athens, 1980); Peter Schreiner, “Diplomatische Geschenke zwischen Byzanz und dem Westen ca. 800–1200: eine Analyse der Texte mit Quellenanhang,” *DOP*, 58 (2004), 251–82; Leslie Brubaker, “The Elephant and the Ark: Cultural and Material Interchange Across the Mediterranean in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries,” *DOP*, 58 (2004), 175–95; Marlia Mango, “Hierarchies of Rank and Materials: Diplomatic Gifts Sent by Romanus I in 935 and 938,” *ΔΧΑΕ*, 24 (2003) 365–74; and Franz Alto Bauer, “Byzantinische Geschenkdiplomatie” in

vestiarion's load should include the imperial regalia, clothing, and items of imperial ceremonial (vessels, swords, perfumes, textiles, etc.), books (liturgical, strategic and prognostic manuals, and histories), and miscellaneous medical substances.³⁷ In addition to these items, according to the text, both textiles and specie were to be included for distribution. Tailored and untailored cloths of varying degrees of quality and with an abundance of decorative features from stripes to eagles, imperial symbol, and hornets, all with precisely specified monetary values, were to be brought along to be dispatched to distinguished powerful foreigners.³⁸ But the question of how such largesse should be distributed apparently required judiciousness. An anonymous sixth-century Byzantine treatise on strategy speaks of the importance of training envoys in the arena of diplomatic gift exchange. An ambassador sent on a mission bearing gifts must judge whether to extend all the gifts brought along, to retain the most valuable, or to hold back the gifts and official letters altogether and deliver only expressions of friendship.³⁹ The text suggests that the middle ground – offering some of the gifts but not all of them – is the best option when dealing with a potential aggressor as it reduces hostility without enriching the enemy.⁴⁰

A critical methodological point emerges from these sources. Generally gifts were extended strategically as part of negotiations for or celebrations of peace, a peace that often did not last the lifetime of the gift itself. To read gifts as evidence for friendly relations is therefore to miss the active role they played in establishing those very relations by their exchange; it is to miss their agency in the political sphere. A recognition of the strategically

Falko Daim and Jörg Drauschke (eds.), *Byzanz, das Römerreich im Mittelalter. Teil 3: Peripherie und Nachbarschaft* (Mainz, 2010), 1–54.

³⁷ See also Michael Hendy's discussion of "the imperial baggage-train" in *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy*, 272–5.

³⁸ Haldon, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus*, 108–11, 126–7: "διὰ τὸ εἰς εὐγενεῖς καὶ μεγάλους ἔθνικοὺς ἀποστέλλεσθαι."

³⁹ George Dennis (ed. and trans.), *Three Byzantine Military Treatises: Text, Translation, and Notes* (Washington DC, 1985), 126: 30–42.

⁴⁰ In addition to offering gifts in the diplomatic field, the *taktika* of Leo VI warns of the dangers of accepting gifts, at least out of rank. It reminds officers in no uncertain terms not to accept gifts from soldiers under their charge ("Without exception, you must not accept any kind of gift from any man under your command, whether of high or low rank"). George Dennis (ed. and trans.), *The Taktika of Leo VI: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Washington DC, 2010), 510: 121–3. The text also warns about the danger of bribery, which can lead to the downfall of an army (566: 427–31). According to the text, not only will bribe-taking leave soldiers resourceless and greedy, it will also result in the promotion of cowardly men and will ultimately prevent the army from facing the enemy courageously. There is therefore an ethics to proper giving and receiving. On bribes and gifts, see also Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy*, 268–71.

significant motivation of giving prompts us to see an element of desire in gifts. If giving is strategic, as contemporary sources make clear, gifts possess a measure of the optative, the linguistic register or grammatical mood of wish or desire. Objects extended as gifts, it is here suggested, cannot be read as evidence for social relations in a straightforward manner. A gift rarely illustrates political allegiance, but rather is often exchanged in an attempt to establish such allegiance. A liturgical vestment sent from Constantinople to Moscow in the early fifteenth century, for example, visually celebrates the intertwined sacro-imperial authority of the Byzantine capital (Figures 5.2–5.5). But my reading of the complicated program of this sumptuous vestment in Chapter 5 situates the motivation of its commission precisely in the loosening of imperial ties with Moscow. Likewise, as argued in Chapter 4, the deluxe manuscript sent to Paris at roughly the same time is motivated by failure rather than success (Figures 4.3–4.4). Its commissioning follows on the heels of the emperor's protracted, and ultimately failed, mission to Western Europe in an attempt to secure aid for Constantinople. These gifts, in other words, were extended in the hope of strengthening ties and building support. Their entire organization was fundamentally strategic and contrived to underscore the Byzantine desire for future allegiance.

There are further methodological implications for invoking analytic tools derived from the field of anthropology within the discipline of art history. In theorizing material gifts, anthropologists and social scientists have for the most part focused on tangible goods of a somewhat generic character, such as foodstuffs or kula shells. The formal particularities of individual objects generally lie outside their analysis and thus the contexts of exchange are privileged over the objects of exchange. On this point, art historians are positioned to offer a significant intervention. The tools of analysis particular to the discipline – stylistic, technical, iconographical, and other – allow for a thorough investigation of the specific material and formal properties of medieval gifts and prestation. It is one thing for textual scholars to recognize the power and hierarchy inherent in gift exchange, and quite another for art historians to elaborate precisely how such agendas are visually constructed by relying on texts, objects, images, and spatial environments.

Nonetheless, anthropologists have taught us to recognize the importance of the ritual context in which gifts are exchanged as well as the social relations triggered by their exchange. An account of the visual dimensions of prestation therefore entails an examination of how the dynamics of obligation and reciprocity are visually encoded not only in objects and images but also in the spaces of their ceremonial performance, display, or concealment. Robin Cormack, for example, has considered the imperial

palace of Constantinople as the ritual setting for the enactment of authority through gift-giving.⁴¹ In addition to environments of gift exchange, gifts themselves have been the subject of recent study, as scholars have begun to consider classes of gifts and patterns of exchange, as well as individual art objects created as gifts, with attention being paid both to their initial offering and to their reception and transformation over time.⁴² Moreover, recent scholarship has attended to the mobilization of gifts in the political, dynastic, and sacred spheres throughout the medieval world. As such scholarship makes clear, medieval gifts arbitrate diplomatic cross-cultural encounter, they mediate familial and dynastic relations, and they triangulate sacred transactions as votive offerings.⁴³ In these diverse contexts, gifts negotiate rivalries and also serve as agents of union.

- ⁴¹ Robin Cormack, "But is it Art?" in Shepard and Franklin (eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy*, 219–36. See also Franz Alto Bauer, "Potentieller Besitz: Geschenke im Rahmen des byzantinischen Hofzeremoniells" in Franz Alto Bauer (ed.), *Visualisierungen von Herrschaft. Frühmittelalterliche Residenzen—Gestalt und Zeremoniell* (Istanbul, 2006), 135–69. For a reading of the ritual and spatial context of gift exchange in the Valois context, see Brigitte Buettnner, "Past Presents: New Year's Gifts at the Valois Courts, ca. 1400," *ArtB*, 83(4) (2001), 598–625.
- ⁴² Classes of objects extended as gifts have been treated most thoroughly by Anthony Cutler in "Gifts and Gift Exchange," and "Significant Gifts." Two recent studies of particular Byzantine gifts, with attention to their later reconfiguration in the West, include Warren Woodfin, "Presents Given and Presence Subverted: The Cunegunda *Chormantel* in Bamberg and the Ideology of Byzantine Textiles," *Gesta*, 47(1) (2008), 33–49; and Hilsdale, "The Social Life of the Byzantine Gift," 602–31.
- ⁴³ On the diplomatic gifts in particular, see note 36 above. Two studies of individual gifts mediating familial tensions include Francisco Prado-Vilar, "Circular Visions of Fertility and Punishment: Caliphal Ivory Caskets from al-Andalus," *Muqarnas*, 14 (1997), 19–41; and Cecily J. Hilsdale, "Constructing a Byzantine *Augusta*: A Greek Book for a French Bride," *ArtB*, 87(3) (2005): 458–83. In terms of sacred transaction, Hugo van der Velden's important study, *The Donor's Image: Gérard Loyet and the Votive Portraits of Charles the Bold*, trans. Beverley Jackson (Brepols, 2000), examines reciprocal complexes and votive portraits, with particular attention to consumable materials and sacred transactions. See also Christopher Wood, "The Votive Scenario," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 59/60 (2011), 207–21. Within the Byzantine context, Nancy Ševčenko and Annemarie Weyl Carr have examined most fully the self-referentiality of votive images with donor portraits: Nancy Ševčenko, "The Representation of Donors and Holy Figures on Four Byzantine Icons," *ΔΧΑΕ*, 17 (1993–4), 157–64; Nancy P. Ševčenko, "Close Encounters: Contact between Holy Figures and the Faithful as Represented in Byzantine Works of Art" in Durand and Guillou (eds.), *Byzance et les images*, 255–85; and Annemarie Weyl Carr, "Donors in the Frames of Icons: Living in the Borders of Byzantine Art," *Gesta*, 45(2) (2006), 189–98. See also more recently Tania Kambourova, "Ktitor: le sens du don des panneaux votifs dans le monde byzantin," *Byzantion*, 78 (2008), 261–87; Tania Kambourova: "Pouvoir et prière dans les images byzantines de don," *RESEE*, 46 (2008), 135–50. Titos Papamastorakis, "The Display of Accumulated Wealth in Luxury Icons: Gift-Giving from the Byzantine Aristocracy to God in the Twelfth Century" in Maria Vassilaki (ed.), *Βυζαντινές Εικόνες: Τέχνη, τεχνική και τεχνολογία* (Voutes Heraklion, 2002), 35–47, has read first-person petitions inscribed by donors on icons in light of the anthropology of gift-giving. See also Franz Alto Bauer, "Herrschergaben an St. Peter," *Mitteilungen zur Spätantiken Archäologie und Byzantinischen Kunstgeschichte*, 4 (2005), 65–99; and Franz Alto

The conceptual framework of the gift as first elaborated in the field of anthropology thus opens up broad avenues of art historical study. While a single unified theory cannot adequately capture the complexity of individual objects and visualizations, understanding gift exchange as a powerful mediating agent in social and sacred dynamics is central to its productivity. As inherently relational, the gift operates on an optative register as an active agent of social bond and fracture, and it obliges and orchestrates power relations among individuals and sacred economies. A recognition of the entangled agendas implicit in the diverse visual cultures of prestation allows us to see the objects of analysis not as mere passive reflections of social and sacred relations but as integral to the production of those relations.

The gift and hindsight

With its focus on the circulation of the imperial image and the gift in the increasingly cosmopolitan later Byzantine diplomatic arena, this book sits at the convergence of a number of key areas of research. Historians have provided comprehensive analyses of foreign diplomatic protocol, practice, and objects.⁴⁴ The later Byzantine period, however, often figures as a mere adjunct, or even an unfortunate coda, to the more prominent earlier period.⁴⁵ This surely relates to the discrepancy between the political reality of the later period and its self-representation, which is described by Nicolas Oikonomides as a “constant opposition between a glorified past on the one hand and the cold facts of the time on the other.”⁴⁶ In light of this opposition,

Bauer, *Gabe und Person: Geschenke als Träger personaler Aura in der Spätantike* (Eichstätt, 2009). See also note 100 in Chapter 1.

⁴⁴ The papers on Byzantine diplomacy edited by Jonathan Shepard and Simon Franklin represent an especially important point of entry to this field. More recently, see S. Lamakis, Maria Leontsini, T. Lounghis, and Vasiliki Vlysidou (eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy: A Seminar* (Athens, 2007), which includes a chapter on the diplomatic efforts of Michael VIII. I thank Telemachos Lounghis for sharing this study with me.

⁴⁵ Nicolas Oikonomides opens his essay “Byzantine Diplomacy, A.D. 1204–1453: Means and Ends” in Shepard and Franklin (eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy*, 73, by noting the meager treatment of the period in Louis Bréhier, *Les institutions de l'empire byzantin* (Paris, 1949) and Dimitri Obolensky, “The Principles and Methods of Byzantine Diplomacy” in *Byzantium and the Slavs* (London, 1994). Note also that of the studies of diplomatic activity mentioned above, Franz Alto Bauer’s “Byzantinische Geschenkdiploamatie,” is exceptional in that it does not end before the Fourth Crusade, unlike Lounghis, *Les ambassades byzantines* and Schreiner, “Diplomatische Geschenke.” There are a number of dedicated studies of diplomatic activities of the later Byzantine period, especially focusing on individual figures such as Demetrios Kydones or Manuel Chrysoloras, which will be addressed in Chapter 5 (where more specific studies of the diplomacy in this period will be cited).

⁴⁶ Oikonomides, in Shepard and Franklin (eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy*, 74.

it is difficult to avoid evaluative judgments, according to which diplomatic strategies of the period are inevitably deemed unsuccessful.⁴⁷ The means and ends of later Byzantine diplomacy are fundamentally in conflict. At least since Edward Gibbon, decline is inevitably associated with fall.⁴⁸ With hindsight, modern scholars who know that the end of the empire was near cannot help but negatively evaluate late Byzantine diplomatic strategies. But this book attempts to suspend such judgment. The perception of decline, testified by intellectuals such as Gregoras with his lament about the pauper “atoms of Epicurus” in the imperial coffers of his day, does not necessarily signal defeat. For those historical actors living through the turbulent later Byzantine period, the perception of decline did not inevitably and teleologically result in the empire’s fall.

The suspension of evaluative judgment stems from the need to see continuity and change in non-teleological terms. Certain aspects of the glorified past, including imperial imagery, were maintained in the face of decline in the Palaiologan period. But despite the conservatism of imperial imagery in general,⁴⁹ in the final centuries of Byzantium we encounter subtle though

⁴⁷ Shepard and Franklin (eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy*.

⁴⁸ In terms of the place of the late Byzantine period in the modern historiography of the Byzantine Empire, it is noteworthy that one of our principal primary sources for the period, Doukas’s *Historia Turko-Byzantina*, is published in English as *The Decline and Fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks* (Detroit, 1975). On the place of Gibbon in the literature on decline, see Peter Burke’s “Tradition and Experience: The Idea of Decline from Bruni to Gibbon,” and Steven Runciman, “Gibbon and Byzantium,” both in G. W. Bowersock, John Clive, Stephen R. Graubard (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 1977). With much of the foundational Byzantine historical scholarship concerned with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Byzantium is read generally as a fundamentally doomed state. For a succinct overview of these vast issues, including a contextualization of Gibbon within the context of British imperialism, see F. K. Haarer, “Writing Histories of Byzantium: The Historiography of Byzantine History” in Liz James (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantium* (New York, 2010), 9–21. It could be argued that the conflation of decline and fall as one teleology represents a fundamentally early modern or modern construct decidedly at odds with the Byzantine understanding of the progress and stasis of temporal power. The dissertation by the late Angela Volan provided an important analysis of the Byzantine understanding of the teleological course of history and apocalyptic prophesies. See Angela Volan, *Last Judgments and Last Emperors: Illustrating Apocalyptic History in Late- and Post-Byzantine Art* (Chicago, 2005).

⁴⁹ André Grabar’s *L’empereur dans l’art byzantin* (Paris, 1936 [1971]) remains the principal study of imperial imagery, which he treats as inherently conservative in nature. Earlier monographs include Jean Ebersolt, *Les arts somptuaires de Byzance; Étude sur l’art impérial de Constantinople* (Paris, 1923); and Spyridon Lampros, *Λεύκωμα Βυζαντινῶν αὐτοκρατόρων* (Athens, 1930). Among the more recent studies of imperial imagery, see Robert S. Nelson and Paul Magdalino, “The Emperor in Byzantine Art of the Twelfth Century,” *ByzF*, 8 (1982), 123–83 [repr. Paul Magdalino, *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Byzantium* (Aldershot, 1991), IV]; Henry Maguire, “Images of the Court” in Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom (eds.), *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843–1261* (New York, 1997), 183–91; Henry Maguire, “The Heavenly Court” in Henry Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine*

discernible innovations. Indeed, as discussed above, the addition of the emperor's portrait to chrysobulls during this later Byzantine period represents one such innovation, as does the introduction of the emperor's effigy to official court dress, where the *skaranon* designates imperial allegiance in clear visual terms – and again, representations of court officials and dignitaries wearing *skaranka* survive in an impressive array of media from the Palaiologan period. As the following chapters make clear, even when largesse was compromised by an economic scarcity that rendered the generous imperial ideal highly problematic, the imperial image was extended as a gift in the most urgent diplomatic contexts. This book thus insists that decline itself is not simply negative, but also contains a recuperative, even generative, dimension. It asks, in other words, what decline enables. What new patterns of artistic practice, patronage, and munificence emerge in the face of decline?

Organization

The trajectory of *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy in an Age of Decline* is governed by the physical heart of the empire, Constantinople. The first part of the book centers on Constantinople's reconquest from the Latins in the thirteenth century; the city's eight-year-long Ottoman siege following the devastating civil wars in the fourteenth century motivates the second half. The beginning of the Palaiologan period and its near end, in other words, provide the frame for the book.⁵⁰ Under the rubric “*Adventus*: the emperor and the city,” the three chapters that comprise Part I engage the 1261 Byzantine restoration of Constantinople. Collectively they investigate the visual negotiation of legitimacy and sovereignty in the opening years

Court Culture from 829 to 1204 (Washington DC, 1997), 247–58 [repr. Henry Maguire, *Image and Imagination in Byzantine Art* (Aldershot, 2007), XI]; and Alicia Walker, *The Emperor and the World: Exotic Elements and the Imaging of Byzantine Imperial Power, Ninth to Thirteenth Centuries CE* (Cambridge, 2012). Complementing these studies of imperial imagery are the following studies of the imperial office, imperial ritual, and political theory: Otto Treitinger, *Die oströmische Kaiser- und Reichsidee nach ihrer Gestaltung im höfischen Zeremoniell: Vom oströmischen Staats- und Reichsgedanken* (Darmstadt, 1956); Dagron, *Emperor and Priest*; Hélène Ahrweiler, *L'idéologie politique de l'Empire byzantin* (Paris, 1975); and Dimiter Angelov, *Imperial Ideology and Political Thought in Byzantium, 1204–1330* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁵⁰ To be clear, the book is divided into two parts by the civil wars of the fourteenth century. The first part of the book centers primarily on the reigns of the first Palaiologoi, Michael VIII, and his son Andronikos II, whose abdication in 1328 ended the First Civil War (1321–8). Resuming after the Second Civil War (1341–7), the second part is set primarily during the reigns of Manuel II and his son John VIII.

of the later Byzantine Empire through three key images of Michael VIII, the first Palaiologan emperor, that engage in differing manners the Byzantine restoration of the imperial city, which was conceptualized as a divine gift.

The opening chapter, set in the years immediately preceding the reconquest of Constantinople, provides a sustained analysis of a silk textile, or *peplos*, sent to Genoa as part of the 1261 Treaty of Nymphaion, the treaty through which Michael, then emperor in exile in Nicaea, formalized an alliance with the Commune of Genoa in an attempt to reconquer Latin-occupied Constantinople. At the center of the silk, the emperor is depicted being led into the church of Genoa framed by a detailed hagiographic cycle of St Lawrence, the patron saint of the Genoese church for which the silk was destined (Figure 1.1). Through the imbrication of imperial image, hagiographic narrative, and political pact, this diplomatic gift is read in Chapter 1 as a visual encomium to the emperor and to imperial transaction on the eve of the defining event of the later Byzantine period and the event for which the *peplos* was custom-created: the return of Byzantine rule to the imperial city.

After 1261, the emperor celebrated the Byzantine restoration of Constantinople through a new visual vocabulary of thanksgiving, as evidenced by a monumental bronze statue erected in the restored city and a related imperial design serially struck and circulated on gold coins, the subjects of Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. Read as the emanation of a fundamentally fraught reign, the bronze monument depicted the emperor offering a model of the imperial city to the *archestrategos* and was erected in front of the Church of the Holy Apostles as part of the emperor's agenda of association with Constantine the Great. Analysis of this no longer extant monument elucidates the problem of legitimacy, one of the key contested issues facing the early Palaiologoi. Beyond forging visual and thematic connections with other imperial monuments from the past throughout the recently restored city, this chapter proposes that the lost monument commemorates imperial genealogy while simultaneously participating in the inauguration of a new iconography of the prostrate emperor, one that signals a profound shift in imperial ideology.

Imperial gold coinage, in all likelihood, provided the most immediate pictorial source for the lost bronze monument. Like the bronze monument, gold coins struck after the imperial restoration of Constantinople depicted the emperor on his knees in a visual dialogue that similarly engaged issues of thanksgiving and legitimacy. The reverse of Michael VIII's gold *hyperpyron* represents the emperor on knee being presented by his angelic advocate to

Christ, and the obverse presents an image of the orant Virgin surrounded by the walls of Constantinople (Figures 3.2–3.4). Chapter 3 reads this unprecedented iconography according to the transactional logic of displaced giving and imperial instrumentality, a concept emphasized in rhetorical sources of the period. Coinage, the very medium of economic exchange that crossed geographical and political boundaries, disseminated this specific vision of imperium to a wide context and is thus ideally suited to trace the circulation of the new image of the emperor for the much-changed later Byzantine Empire. This chapter advances the claims of the previous chapter in its discussion of the innovative visual rhetoric inaugurated by the imperial capital's reconquest, but it also constitutes the transition to Part II, in that it traces the numismatic reconfigurations prompted by the instability of Palaiologan succession, and the rupture of the fourteenth-century civil wars when Byzantine gold ceased to be struck altogether.

In examining the art and politics of the restored Byzantine capital, Part I argues for the instantiation of a new and distinctly Palaiologan imperial image. It further assesses the nature of the empire's restoration. What previous models of rule were evoked and at what cost was the restoration effected? The large silk *peplos* sent to the Italian maritime city, as well as the monumental bronze effigy of imperial gift-giving and the serially struck gold coins, usher in a period where largesse would be compromised by an economic scarcity that rendered the generous imperial ideal more problematic. Within the new economic constraints of this age, what patterns of artistic practice, patronage, and largesse emerged?

Part II of the book provides some provisional answers to these questions. Under the rubric of the “‘Atoms of Epicurus’: the imperial image as gift in an age of decline,” Chapters 4 and 5 turn to diplomatic gift-giving strategies in the early fifteenth century. These chapters argue for the cultivation of two distinct later Byzantine imperial identities: that of the emperor as custodian of a long and venerable philosophical tradition and also as the guardian of Orthodox spirituality. In the restored but politically and economically unstable diplomatic arena of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, new diplomatic gift-giving strategies needed to be developed. Byzantine textiles, icons, and relics were still extended as gifts as they had been in earlier times, though often recycled and re-gifted, but their status across the Mediterranean was significantly diminished as the silk trade had been demonopolized, trade routes relinquished, and sacred relics looted by Latin crusaders.

New sources of value for exchange with the courts of Western Europe were required, and Greek learning was cultivated in order to meet this

diplomatic need. Chapter 4 takes as its focus an illuminated manuscript of the Neoplatonic writings of Pseudo Dionysios the Areopagite that was sent to Paris in 1408 after Manuel II's extended diplomatic mission to the West (Figures 4.3–4.4). By tracing the elaborate genealogy of past gifts to which it relates, this chapter sees this book as part of a conscious fostering of Greek studies on the part of the Byzantine imperial administration. The Renaissance fascination with Hellenism emerges here as an informed Byzantine diplomatic strategy: the imperial court recognized western desires for Greek texts and, taking advantage of that interest, fostered Hellenic studies through gifts of manuscripts and teachers.

A vastly different visual rhetoric was employed within the larger Orthodox *oikoumene*. One consequence of the tenuous socio-political climate of the era was that Orthodoxy itself became the subject of diplomatic negotiation. In the beginning of the Palaiologan period, Michael VIII attempted to subject the Byzantine Church to Rome at the Council of Lyons (1274), and in the final years of the Palaiologoi, John VIII agreed to a unification of the Eastern and Western Churches at the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–9). The tension between Byzantine spirituality and empire – and in particular an impoverished empire – is explored in Chapter 5, which considers an elaborate liturgical vestment made in Constantinople and sent to the metropolitan of Kiev and all of Russia in the early fifteenth century (Figures 5.2–5.5). Embedded within the elaborate liturgical cycle are representations of the future Emperor John VIII alongside his bride Anna of Moscow, in addition to her parents and the Metropolitan Photios, who was appointed by the patriarch of Constantinople. While the vestment celebrates the union through marriage of the Muscovite and Byzantine royal houses, it ultimately emphasizes Orthodoxy as the source of their unity above all. Chapter 5 argues that imperial Constantinople is positioned as the source for Orthodoxy, and in this way the *sakkos* is read as a visual analog to the celebrated letter of Patriarch Anthony reminding the Grand Duke of Moscow that there could be no church without the empire.

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By taking as a point of departure art objects themselves – their agency, status, and social lives – the present study brings conceptual issues of cultural exchange to the concrete level of material culture. The theoretical stakes therefore hinge upon the status of the art object. Following anthropologists who study the “social lives of things,” to borrow a phrase from Arjun Appadurai, this book assumes that gifts from the beleaguered late Byzantine Empire contain the kind of agency usually associated with individuals rather

than objects.⁵¹ As extended gestures of their givers, they become metonymic evocations of the desires and aspirations of their creators. While I insist on the strategic nature of gifts – and accordingly read their visual programs in light of the very precise political and ideological contexts of their creation and dissemination – it is imperative to distinguish between intention and reception, and to acknowledge that gifts mediate a middle ground. The analyses in the pages that follow are driven by the objects of analysis themselves and their precise formal and material properties. This book thus remains rooted in the techniques of art historical inquiry and hence attends to the particular formal idiom expressed in each instance. The particular rationale for the focus on things, however, is to be found in the historiography of Byzantine art itself within the wider art historical field. The insistence on looking closely at particular moments, monuments, and trajectories of cultural encounter serves as a means of countering broad generalizations about Byzantine pictorial “influence,” where the eastern empire is rendered passive and unchanging in a teleology that privileges the rise of the West. By interrogating the concrete transfer of objects, this book seeks to provide a more nuanced and dynamic account of medieval artistic exchange, one that takes into account the temporal dimensions of power and the changing fates of empires.

⁵¹ This approach to objects and their cultural life is indebted to anthropological theorists discussed above, such as Mauss, Weiner, Bourdieu, Appadurai, and Kopytoff, as well as to scholars of literary and cultural studies, such as Bill Brown and Bruno Latour. See Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry*, 28(1) (2001), 1–22; and Bill Brown, “Reification, Reanimation and the American Uncanny,” *Critical Inquiry*, 32(2) (2006), 175–207; and Bruno Latour, “Introduction: How to Resume the Task of Tracing Associations” and “Third Source of Uncertainty: Objects Too Have Agency” in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005), 1–17 and 63–86, respectively. These investigations of “thing theory” have been fruitfully embraced by art historians such as Jennifer L. Roberts in “Copley’s Cargo: Boy with a Squirrel and the Dilemma of Transit,” *American Art*, 21(2) (2007), 20–41. A useful point of entry to this debate is Fiona Candlin and R. Guins (eds.), *The Object Reader. In Sight: Visual Culture* (Abingdon, 2008).