
THE RULER'S PORTRAIT IN BYZANTINE ART

A FEW OBSERVATIONS REGARDING ITS

FUNCTIONS

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Abstract

There are very little variations in the evolution of portraits' functions on the entire length of over eleven centuries of Byzantine art and the four more of post-Byzantine. Basically, they accomplish a documentary role: they are used on legal acts, on votive objects or accompany funeral tombs. Rulers' portraits were seen as efficient symbols of the institution of monarchy, in which case were used on coins, legal acts and seals, as a guarantee of authenticity and legal effectiveness. Emperor's portrait had, in some situations, the status of replacing the real presence of the monarch, e.g. in courtrooms, or sent to vassal princes in diplomatic purposes, to replace symbolically the visit of the sovereign. Imperial representations in mural paintings were generally accomplished in votive or commemorative purposes. Their images illustrated the religious concept of the nature of monarchy: the divine origin of power. Their role, in this case, was of moral antidotes against the corruption of political power. Not the monarch prescribed the spiritual functions and themes of his portraits, but he was the one to whom they were prescribed, by intellectuals and theologians, through the artists.

Keywords: portrait, Byzantine art, image, monarchs, political theology

1. Introduction

The function of secular portraits in Byzantium was basically one of physical image, bearing memorial purpose. In this concern, it was followed the Roman artistic tradition: a historical person persists in being visible also after one's death, through portraits. „The faces of the dead people continue to live, in a certain way, a long life through painting. Painting was given us by Gods, who are venerated by people, so we think this is a great gift given to the mortals”, stated the Renaissance theoretician Leon Battista Alberti about the function of portraits in the tradition of Antiquity [1].

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The perception of contemporary public upon the images of the Byzantine emperors generated, as anterior besides the Roman emperors, narrative descriptions about the powerful impression left by the contemplation of their portraits. „The emperor’s picture is so alike himself, that if anyone would like to see the emperor after he had contemplated his portrait, it [the image] would reply judiciously: ‘I and the emperor are one, I am in him and he is me, everything you see in me you see in him and what is in him is also in me’. Therefore, who worships the emperor’s image, honours him. In image is being revealed the emperor’s essence of being”, theorized Saint Athanasius of Alexandria in the 4th century [2], about icon as portrait, using the widely shared perception of the image of emperor as analogy in his argument concerning the veneration of icons.

Jean-Claude Schmitt and Robin Cormack, rejecting the strict definition of icons as cult objects, given by Hans Belting and Charles Barber [3, 4], stressed that even the public perception has shown consistently that the icons and secular paintings can be interpreted on different levels: both in religious terms and in socio-political and aesthetic ones. The public perceives on the one hand, the objectual function and thematic meanings of religious icons and secular portraits, and on the other hand, appreciates them aesthetically [5]. There is a vast and varied range of portrait images in the late-antique and medieval period, showing a marked concern of owners and donors for the quality of artistic works but also for their socio-political emphasis.

2. Functions and perceptions of Byzantine imperial portraits

There are very little variations in the evolution of portraits’ functions on the entire length of over eleven centuries of Byzantine art and the four more of post-Byzantine. Basically, they accomplish a documentary role: are used on legal acts, on votive objects or accompany funeral tombs. Rulers’ portraits were seen as efficient symbols of the institution of monarchy, in which case were used on coins, legal acts and seals.

Emperor’s portrait had, in some situations, the status of replacing the real presence of the monarch. When it was brought into courtrooms, the image was acclaimed as the emperor himself. When imperial portraits were sent to vassal princes in diplomatic purposes, the image was replacing symbolically the visit of the sovereign. On seals and coins, monarch’s representation was regarded as a guarantee of authenticity and legal effectiveness. Chrysobull portraits had the same legal significance of donations authentication [6, 7]. Embroidered on costumes of the empress, officials, churchmen or foreign vassals, they were a sign of honour and obedience [8]. There was no difference in perception between these mobile portraits and the portraits in mural painting; they only had different functions, imperial representations in mural paintings being generally accomplished in votive or commemorative purposes.

Representation of the emperors is marked by conventionality; in portraits, no observation model is followed, but the idea corresponding to it. Compared with the concept of portrait by nature, the effigy is more appropriate in this type of relationship with the truth. The imperial symbols: crown, sceptre, *globus*, *labarum*, *loros*, the ceremonial costume are the real being and substance of the monarch [9]. The portrait of the sovereign is thus revealing only by adding representations of the symbols of its political attributes.

To the descriptions of portraits and representations of monarchs join other literary genres with a close thematic significance: descriptions of the imperial palace [10], of the Byzantine court ceremonies or even descriptions of the physical appearance of emperors [11]. The concept of absolute authority of Byzantine emperors is displayed in their various representations: the advent of emperors during processions was directed to suggest a theophany [12] and their portraits were idealized, sumptuously decorated, static, impassive, in fact stereotyped, reflecting an ideal monarchical prototype [13].



Figure 1. Saint Sophia, eastern wall of the south gallery. Constantine IX Monomachos and Empress Zoe (post 1028).

The nimbus that appears around the heads in the portraits of Byzantine emperors marks the presence of a *genius imperatoris* in the person of the monarch, meaning the power to rule and legislate. Though it is a pagan symbol, it may be venerated also in the Christian sense: the nimbus indicates the political power, a God-given charisma. Even the emperors who were heretics and iconoclasts were represented wearing nimbus, with no iconographic difference from saints. Monarchs are carriers of the nimbus because they are legitimate

holders of the divine legislative and judicial power [14]. The tradition that understood wisdom as divine, represented by a sphere of light around the head is antique and has Pythagorean and neo-Platonic references. It was reused in Christian sense by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in his theological writings [15]. In painted portraits, it is used only for the emperors, bearing universal political power, and not for local rulers, princes and dukes, with a narrower political influence.

The display of the Byzantine emperors' biological age in portraits is quite schematic, encased in general age categories of Hellenistic art canons, which were used in any anthropomorphic representation: beardless young man, bearded adult, grey old. Empresses, however, are portrayed in a sort of ideal age: Empress Zoe, at age over fifty, was portrayed in full youth at Saint Sophia (Figure 1) [16].

Another aspect of the emperor's image perception points the impressions produced by ruler of Constantinople to the foreign public, especially to the Western one, rival and hostile in many ways to the power and culture of Byzantium. During the visit of Manuel II Palaeologus in France, the Western society had experienced the vision of the 'Greek king' with his different look and also clearly distinct behaviour and piety from the Western culture [17]. French artists suggestively recorded the shock of mentality produced by what emerged as cultural exoticism. Manuel has been used as a model for one of the Magi in a Magi worship scene from *Les Très Riches Heures* illuminated book of Duc of Berry (post 1410; Figure 2a). The same happened with the figure of John VIII Palaeologus, portrayed by the Florentine master Benozzo Gozzoli as a magician in a fresco in the Magi Chapel of the palace Medici-Ricardi (1459-1461, Figure 2b) [18]. In these areas of cultural meetings, which are the visual arts, took place the visual transformation of Manuel and John VIII, who became the prototype of the Oriental and the archaic 'proto-Christian' monarch. The Byzantine emperors in Western art are not presented as themselves, but in a sort of disguise [19].

The Western and Byzantine cultures were not different only in the matter of piety, but also of political decisions. Western interpretations of these decisions are critical, especially against the late period of the Byzantine emperors, whose policy towards the Ottoman problem is seen as reluctant. Some historians considered that in Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ*, Pilate, the representative of the Roman empire who ordered Christ's execution and witnessed it regardless, it is believed to be represented with the face of John VIII Palaeologus, the Christian emperor whose fatal indecision to ally with the West against the Turks caused the downfall of Constantinople and the sufferings of the Eastern Christians [20].



(a)



(b)

Figure 2. (a) *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (Chantilly), Limburg brothers *et alii*, post 1410, f. 52 r, Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologus as Magus Melchior; (b) Procession of the Magi arrival, the Chapel of the Magi, Palazzo Medici-Ricardi (Florence), Benozzo Gozzoli (1459-1461), Emperor John VIII Palaeologus as Magus Bathazar.

On the other hand, the reactions of the Byzantine bishops and emperors and their entourage against the cultural and political differences seen in the West, are similar. The Byzantine reactions against Western artworks betray hostility. It remained recorded a highly known episode due to the Grand Ecclesiarch of Saint Sophia Sylvester Syropoulos [21], who, looking at some Renaissance paintings with religious themes in Italy, refuses to accept that these images could be true holy icons [22].

The casual events of intentional destruction and mutilation of images of emperors give also an useful testimony about the physical power the image was entrusted with in the Byzantine culture. Perhaps the most explicit such case, besides the anger of iconoclasm, is the destruction, under the command of Andronicus I Comnenus, of the images of previous emperors from the palace, in order to deny their power and to consolidate stronger the worship of his own image. The situation returned however with the same weapons, against him: the insurgent population of Constantinople, who deposed and murdered him finally, also vandalised his pictures from the palace, for the same purpose of minimizing his power and to delete his memory [23].

Votive images were frequently used especially by rulers in order to legalize the act of their donation. Regular votive inscriptions accompanying the images enhanced the legal status of the foundation document; words were accompanying the artwork images in the form of an inscription. The relationship between visual and verbal, between image and inscription in Byzantine culture was not priority of a comment, but a functional 'double' of the image [24]. In this respect, votive or funerary inscriptions and epigrams were used together with portraits, literary genre from that one can extract useful material for reconstructing the function of portraits in the Byzantine tradition [25].

Votive pictures had the important quality of presenting the donor in communion with the Church. They represent both a confession of faith and a form of prayer, a key issue for a Christian monarch to build a solid authority among his people. The iconographic representation of donation was built in Byzantine and post-Byzantine art after an ancient Roman image formula: the votive object was represented symbolically, carried by the donor in his hands. This object, often miniaturized, could be a church, a pecuniary donation, a legal act, a book or simply a votive symbolic cross, which the donor was presenting to Divinity [26] (Figure 3).

Christian monarchs were seeing as a personal duty the votive act of building religious monuments, mentality which is based on Scripture, on the example of kings David and Solomon, the founders of God's Temple in Jerusalem. This view can be read easily in Byzantium, in the most prolific building programs of the emperors Constantine and Justinian. In the mosaic above the great entry of the church of Saint Sophia in Constantinople (end of 10th century), the two greatest *basileis* of the empire, Constantine and Justinian, offer to Virgin Mary, Queen of Heavens, the first one the maquette of 'the queen of cities', Constantinople, and the other one, the model of the Great Church of Saint Sophia [27] (Figure 4a).

The theme of tsar as God's temple builder is used in the aulic painting of Dečani Serbian monastery: along with the representations of biblical kings David and Solomon, the models par excellence of church founders. The Serbian kings Stefan Dečanski and his son Stefan Dušan are represented on the eastern narthex wall, below the icon of Christ Pantocrator, the patron of the church [28] (Figure 4b).



Figure 3. (a) *Homilies sf. John Chrysostom* (Paris, BNF Coislin 79, cca. 1078), Emperor Nichifor III Botaniates, the donor of the codex, is represented donating it to Saint John Chrysostom; (b) Andronicus II Palaeologus' chrysobull addressed to the Archbishop of Monembasia (1301, today in Athens, Byzantine Museum), the Emperor is presented giving the chrysobull to Christ.

Monarchs' overall motivation of church founding was the Christian duty to perform acts of piety. Even the building of good governance is conditioned, for the faithful rulers, by their personal reconciliation with God. The rulers' donation documents often say that the monument they founded was made by charity and for the reasons of sins' forgiveness [29, 30]. Since the power of ruling was a gift from God, the rulers were bound to return that gift through religious foundations and donations. In this way, they presented themselves as defenders of Christian faith and law, for which purpose have received the divine gift of power [31].



(a)



(b)

Figure 4. (a) Saint Sophia, Constantinople (ca. 990), the western portal: the Emperor Justinian offers Virgin Mary the Church of Saint Sophia and Emperor Constantine, the city of Constantinople, presented as symbolical models; (b) Dečani, narthex, eastern wall, above the entrance: Christ Pantocrator (icon of the church's patron) below, the figures of the two founders, Štefan Dečanski and his son Štefan Dušan.

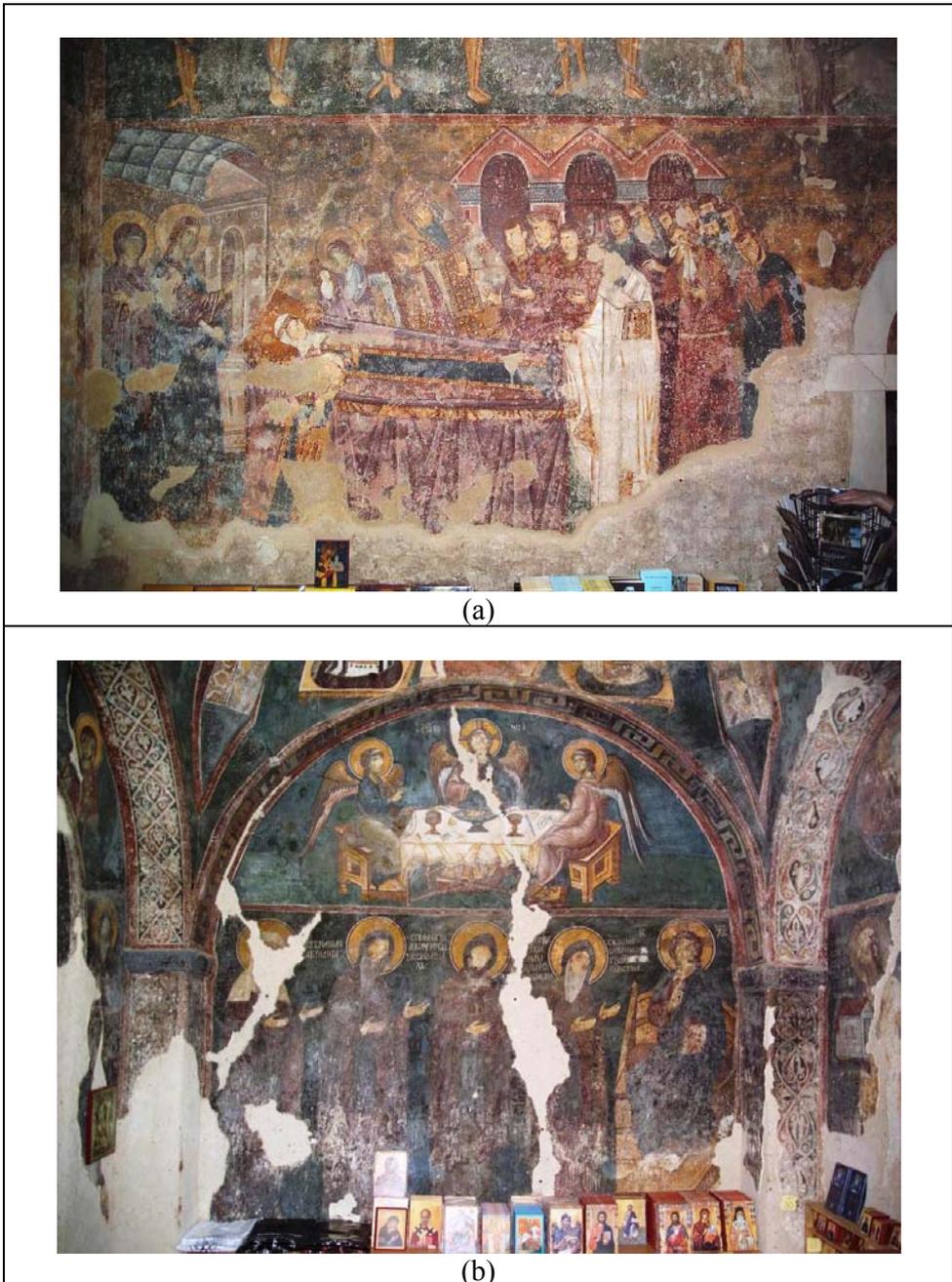


Figure 5. (a) Sopočani, narthex, Anne Dandolo's funeral procession, led by his son, King Stefan Uroš: the composition is similar to the Assumption of Mother of God; (b) Djurdjevi Stupovi, south chapel (ca. 1282 / 3), deceased Nemanja kings procession as monks, before the throne of Christ (south wall): on the right, King Dragutin, founder of the chapel (west wall).

In both hereditary (dynastic) and elective monarchies, the respect for the memory of ancestor monarchs is well established. Except the very rare cases of *damnatio memoriae*, due mostly in medieval times to the affiliation of the ruler to a different religion or confession than the majority of his people (e.g. the Bulgarian case of Catholicized tsar Kalojan, the post-Byzantine Romanian cases of Wallachian Catholicized prince Mihnea ‘the Evil’ and Islamized Moldavian prince Iliăș), the aulic art was used to commemorate also the predecessor rulers.

A monument is not, therefore, tied only to a single figure but often involves the desire to establish a memory of the ‘political family’ of predecessor and successor rulers tied together by a continuous political tradition (e.g. in Serbia, Wallachia). The role of the monument in Byzantine tradition is thus essentially memorial: through his work, the founder wishes to remain alive over time in the memory of society [32]. As noted before, the monumental tombs and funerary chapels were designed as ‘permanent residences’, which had to preserve founders’ memory for posterity, in a retrospective and laudatory manner [33].

However, what continues to separate the Byzantine religious art from the Western one is the different understanding of the sacredness of life and death, so easily visible in the funerary monuments and portraits. To Western human pessimism, paralyzed by the transience of life [34], opposes in Byzantium an optimistic view: the acquisition, through death, of incorruptibility and eternal deification of the man in Christ [35]. The ‘death mask’ of the believer should not be different than the icon of the saint [5, p. 164] and the model par excellence of Christian death and burial is that of the Assumption of Mother of God [36]. For this reason, the funeral monument in Byzantine tradition is not only memorial in the strict sense as in Western art, but is constituted as a form of continuous spiritual sharing of the dead with the living (Figure 5) [37].

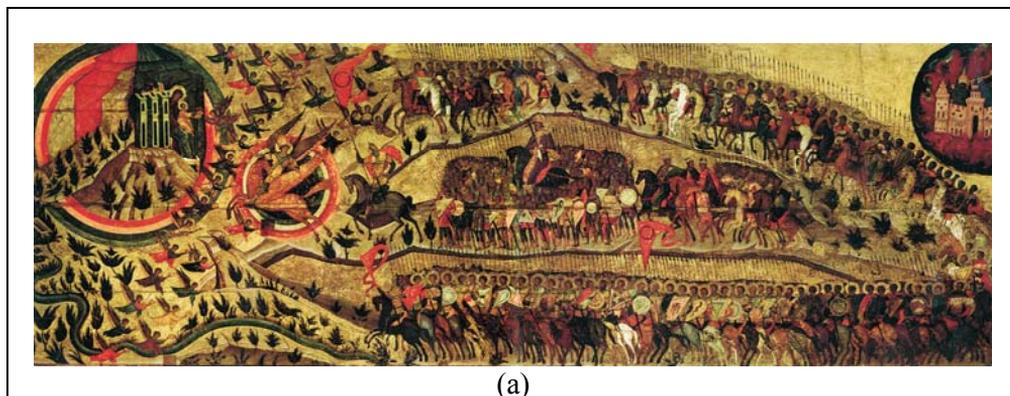


Figure 6. Icon (ca. 1552, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), representing the triumph of Tsar Ivan IV on Tatar city of Khazan. The tsar, surrounded by his army and holy martyrs, is led by the Archangel Michael to the heavenly Jerusalem.

As Byzantine art, the Romanian or Russian post-Byzantine art is the result of two formative influences: the theological hierarchy of the Church and monastic environment, on the one hand, and the court political culture of the prince, on the other side. This formative ambivalence of Byzantine art does not reach only the style of the artworks, but also affects their themes and iconography [38]. Because the Church's life depended on the material donations of the believers and especially on monarchs, the aulic portraits and compositions are always present and even entered the most substantial iconography, blending peacefully with the liturgical and hagiographical themes or even becoming part of them. This started from the times of Justinian, increased frequently starting to the Macedonian imperial dynasty in middle-aged Byzantium, entering also the Balkans and continuing in the post-Byzantine times (Figure 6). The themes of political theology are the main topics ordered by monarchs in church paintings. The most important were: the divine source of power, legitimacy of Prince proved by his Orthodox faith, ruler's duty to lead people's destiny without diverting it to heresy or unbelief, the rulers' biblical models of Old Testament kings and prophets and, last but not least, the duty of the ruler to support financially and morally the Church institution, especially through donations.

In churches' iconography, there are accomplished concrete historical references through the secular portraits of country's rulers, of the local Church, of the congregation superiors and founders. Since the believers are citizens of both kingdoms, the Celestial and the earthly, led by an Orthodox monarch, the liturgy prays for the both worlds. These worlds contain one another, but their size and strength are obviously different. The same semantic structure and the same 'actors' remembered in the liturgy must be reflected in the iconography of the church paintings.

In the case of Romanian historiography, especially in the analysis of medieval votive portraits, the tendency went to the opposite direction than denying their artistic quality. Nicolae Iorga considered medieval royal portraits as works of art par excellence, and for this reason held constantly at the idea of an artistic collection of Romanian princely effigies: "a collection of all these portraits should precede any album of selected pieces of old Romanian painting" [39]. Other authors have, instead, a very restricted perspective on the value and even the artistic significance of medieval portraits, considering in research only their documentary information, useful for social history and historical anthropology [40].

3. Conclusions

Monarchs' portraits are, in principle, placed in the highest category of propaganda images. In churches, however, the images were displaying the relation of monarchs with God, who gave them the power of monarchy in exchange to undertake the defence of Christian law. The images are addressed to the masses with the purpose to present monarchs as generous donors, as well as ubiquitous authorities. Their images illustrated the religious concept -not the

secular- of the nature of monarchy: the divine origin of power. For this reason, they had especially a parenetic function, addressed to the rulers they represented. Their role, in this case, was not intended to praise political programs or to represent the self-reflections of emperors on the matters of ruling, but to be moral antidotes against the corruption of political power. Therefore, not the monarch prescribed the spiritual functions and themes of his portraits, but he was the one to whom they were prescribed, by intellectuals and theologians, through the artists.

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