

The Gender of Money: Byzantine Empresses on Coins (324–802)

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Coins played different roles in the ancient and medieval worlds from those that they play in the economy today. In the late antique and early Byzantine world – that is, roughly between 300 and 800 – there were in a sense two currencies: gold coins and base metal (copper) coins. Both were minted and distributed by the state, but the gold *solidi* (in Latin) or *nomismata* (in Greek), introduced in 309, were by the end of the fifth century in practice used above all for the payment of tax and for major transactions such as land sales, while the copper coins (*nummi*, replaced in 498 by *folles*) were broadly the currency of market transactions.¹ Another striking difference is that late antique and Byzantine coin types changed with great frequency: as an extreme example, Maria Alföldi catalogued over seven hundred different types for a single emperor, Constantine I the Great (306–37, sole ruler from 324).² There are many reasons for this, but one of the most important has to do with communication: centuries before the advent of the press, images on coins were a means to circulate information about the state. This is particularly true of the first three and a half centuries covered by this article. While the extent to which coins were used in daily exchange transactions is still uncertain, and was very variable, the frequency with which they appear in archaeological excavations of urban sites throughout the former eastern Roman empire until 658 indicates their wide diffusion. After this, gold coinage continues in

the east, albeit on a reduced scale, but copper coins become very rare until the ninth century.³ Until the 650s, then, copper coins may be seen as a vehicle for the dissemination of ideas and ideals approved by the state to a reasonably wide popular base.⁴ Gold coins had a more restricted audience, the precise configuration of which remains unclear, but one that spans the entire period covered here.

Little attention has been paid to the ways coins communicated in the late antique and early Byzantine world,⁵ or to the gender strategies that played themselves out at the mints.⁶ In particular, while various aspects of the role of the Byzantine empress have been studied in recent years,⁷ little attention has been paid to the portraits of empresses on Byzantine coinage. These portraits are, however, important witnesses to how imperial women were presented to the collective gaze. We use the passive tense intentionally, for on the whole the coins do not show us how empresses represented themselves, but rather how their images were constructed by others to convey a series of messages for public consumption.⁸ Byzantine mints were at least nominally controlled by the state,⁹ and the decoration stamped on coins normally promoted state interests. Generally, Byzantine coins communicated aspects of imperial ideology, and the coins portraying empresses were no exception. The coin messages were conveyed through a combination of words and images, and usually the images were imperial portraits.

Underpinning the numismatic iconography of individual rulers is an assumption that, so far as we are aware, was never articulated: the importance of expressing hierarchical structure. Coins make hierarchy explicit through a series of carefully calibrated details, the meaning of which remained remarkably stable throughout the period covered by this article.¹⁰ The most significant indicator was the position of a figure (or figures) on the coin, with the obverse (front) being more important than the reverse (back).

A second index of importance applied only to group portraits. These replicated actual imperial protocol, where the more important figure always stood or sat to the right of the less important figure; on coins, this means that from the viewer's perspective the more important figure is always on the left. When the emperor and empress are shown together (Figures 6, 7, 8, 9), the emperor is always on (our) left. In three-figure compositions, the most important figure was placed in the centre, the second ranking figure was located to the central figure's right (the viewer's left) and the least important figure was set on the central figure's left (the viewer's right). When the imperial

couple flanks Christ (Figures 4–5), the emperor is thus on (our) left, the empress on (our) right; and when an empress and a junior emperor appear together with the senior emperor (Figure 8), the empress takes the tertiary position on (our) right.

A final expression of hierarchy on Byzantine numismatic portraiture is defined by absence. Imperial control of the mints allowed the senior ruler considerable control over numismatic content, and no emperor was obliged to include portraits of his junior co-rulers or of his wife. In other words, Herakleios did not have to include his wife Martina and his son Herakleios Constantine on the coin illustrated in Figure 8, but elected to do so. To a certain extent, the decision to include or omit additional figures on coinage was conditioned by recent convention: if the previous emperor had struck coins without additional figures, the current emperor was likely to follow suit. Changes in practice are therefore particularly noteworthy, and sometimes occasioned comment at the time.¹¹ While an emperor might deny association for a variety of personal or political reasons,¹² the abrupt addition of another figure, or figures, was almost always politically motivated. The role of gender in the visual rhetoric of politics is thus especially well revealed on coins.

For all of these reasons, it is legitimate to look to coin imagery as a barometer of imperial status and authority, as a rich source of information on the officially promoted position of the empress in Byzantium, and as an index of how perceptions of her role changed over time.

One final introductory excursus is necessary, on the ideological and legal relationship between an emperor and an empress in Byzantium. To put it crudely, the Byzantine state system was structured around the belief that the emperor was God's chosen representative on earth. In theory, his authority was unlimited and he was enveloped in an aura of holiness and unapproachability, created and maintained through a complicated tapestry of ceremonial and ritual, that served to emphasise his role as the link between the terrestrial and celestial spheres.¹³ Especially in the early Byzantine years, the emperor's close association with God sometimes slipped into the older Roman notion of the *divus augustus*: in the early fifth century, for example, Priskos was sent by the emperor Theodosios II on an embassy to the Huns, along with the interpreter Vigilas, and 'the barbarians toasted Attila and we Theodosios. But Vigilas said that it was not proper to compare a god and a man, meaning Attila by a man and Theodosios by a god. This

annoyed the Huns'.¹⁴ The association did not extend to the empress. If the emperor was chosen by God, the empress was chosen by the emperor. She was not usually crowned by the archbishop of Constantinople (the patriarch), but by the emperor himself in a ceremony that could take place following their marriage (if he was already an emperor) or at some point after his coronation (if they were already married). It could even not take place at all, should the emperor decide, for whatever reason, not to crown his wife.¹⁵ The significant distinction here is that the empress did not receive her authority from God, but from the emperor; in legal terms, the empress was subject to the law, the emperor was above it.¹⁶

The emperor Constantine I the Great (sole rule 324–37), regarded as a saint soon after his death, was revered by later Byzantines for two reasons. First, he was credited with converting the Roman empire to Christianity, and was thus hailed as the first Christian emperor. Second, he refounded the old city of Byzantium and renamed it Constantinople ('Constantine's city'). Called Istanbul since its conquest in 1453 by the Ottoman Turks, it was the major city of the Byzantine empire from the fourth to the fifteenth century; until at least the twelfth, it was the largest and richest city in the Christian world.¹⁷ Coins minted during the reign of Constantine did not demonstrate any particular break from earlier Roman patterns. It is nonetheless important to introduce them here, because the coin types became important touchstones for later generations of Byzantine rulers who wished to associate themselves with the Constantinian house.

Constantinian coinage includes portraits of his wife Fausta (minted in the brief interlude between 324 and her disgrace and murder in 326), his mother Helena, and his stepmother Theodora. In all cases, the women are depicted alone on the obverse (front) of the coin in the contemporary Roman style of the profile bust; all are identified by name and title. The title, *augusta*, was conceived as a female form of the Roman emperor Augustus's name (which he assumed in 27 BC, before which he was known as Octavian), and willed to Augustus's wife Livia after his death in AD 14; imperial women are so designated on Roman coinage from the reign of Claudius (41–54).¹⁸ In the Greek east, it was regularly – though not inevitably – used as a title for imperial wives until the thirteenth century, and it was also bestowed on other female family members such as Helena (mother of Constantine I) and Pulcheria (sister of Theodosios II).¹⁹ The designation *basilissa* also appears in the sources but is not found on coins until 797.²⁰

The reverse of the Constantinian empress coins always depicts a personification. Fausta's are identified either as *salus reipublicae* (well-being or health of the republic) or as *spes reipublicae* (hope of the republic) (Figure 1), each holding two children; both appear on *nummi* and, occasionally, on *nomismata*.²¹ These personifications had appeared on Roman coins: *salus* since the republic, *spes* since the first century AD.²² While they had not normally appeared with children, the constellation of messages now conveyed by Fausta's coins – fertility, security and dynastic stability – continued associations between imperial women and the well-being of the state that had long been a commonplace of Roman imperial imagery.²³ The same emphases are repeated time and again in later empress coins, and, though they certainly perpetuated earlier Roman patterns, their constant reiteration suggests that they struck chords with contemporary Byzantine beliefs as well. In fact, they correspond exactly with one of the crucial roles of imperial women: ideologically, and also practically, speaking, the primary duty of the empress was to provide heirs to the throne, thereby guaranteeing the succession and, by implication, the stability and security of the state. Normally, this was achieved biologically, but the empress could also secure a stable succession in other ways: for example, she could legitimise a potential male ruler through adoption or marriage. Fausta followed the normal course of events, and in 317 gave birth to the future Constantius II, Constantine's successor. This was not necessarily a foregone conclusion, and subsequent coin issues would respond to the crisis in Constantinian succession.



Figure 1: *Nomisma*: Fausta (obverse); *spes reipublicae* (reverse) (325–6).

Long before this, however, coins were minted in honour of Constantine's mother Helena. These are very similar to Fausta's, save that the personification is differently identified (Figure 2). In coins issued between 324 and 329/30, Helena is accompanied by *securitas reipublice* (security of the republic): Helena has provided for the security of the republic by providing her son as its ruler.²⁴

Helena died in 329 or 330. About seven years later, in mid 337, a *nummus* was struck with a profile portrait of Helena on the obverse, and a personification identified as *pax publica* (public peace) on the reverse.²⁵ Like the *salus*, *spes* and *securitas* coins, the posthumous association of Helena with public peace inscribed a message of state well-being on a portrait of an imperial woman, but the nuances of that message were changed by the use of a different personification. The *pax* coins appeared only after Constantine's death in May of 337, and they were matched by the issue of a *nummus* that promoted Constantine's stepmother, Theodora, in the same year. The latter shows Theodora on the obverse, with a personification of *pietas romana* (Roman piety), infant at her breast, on the reverse.²⁶ Both series were minted in response to the struggle for succession after Constantine's death, which pitted Constantine's own sons against the sons of his father's second wife, Theodora: the posthumous Helena/*pax* coins promoted the interests of Constantine's sons and Helena's grandsons, while the Theodora/*pietas* coins championed the interests of her sons, Constantine's half-brothers.



Figure 2: *Nomisma* (double weight): Helena (obverse); *securitas reipublicae* (reverse) (324–30).

In this context, the Helena and Theodora *nummi* are interesting for a number of reasons. First, it is clear that both sides considered coins to be useful and suitable ammunition in the contest for supporters. Second, both sides evidently believed that the virtues attached to women, and conveyed through images of women, were appropriate buttresses for their own positions. Third, the women selected to carry these virtues were mothers rather than wives. This was no doubt due to the particular circumstances of the struggle to which the coins respond, the contest between the grandson of Constantius Chlorus's first partner, Helena, and the offspring of his second, Theodora. As Jan Drijvers has already noticed, the two women are presented 'as the ancestresses of the respective branches of the Constantinian family'.²⁷ The messages carried by the personifications are also important, and they hint at the issues involved in dynastic politics in the second quarter of the fourth century. Both personifications salute old Roman values – *pax* and *pietas* – that had long been associated with women, and both stress their 'roman-ness' in the legends attached to the image: *pax publica*, *pietas romana*. But the juxtaposition also seems to imply a choice between the peaceful continuation of the new order and the return to Roman (non-Christian) piety, a contest between new and old values – a contest that would be brought to a head when Theodora's grandson Julian (the Apostate) finally achieved the throne in 360/1.²⁸ This is a lot of weight for a small coin to bear, but the issues make no sense otherwise; and one suspects that inexpensive *nummi* were chosen for this visual contest because they enjoyed a wider circulation and reached a wider audience than high denomination gold coinage.

In the aftermath of this high-profile use of empress coins in a political contest, after 340 there are no more empress coins for over forty years; nor did the emperors who followed Constantine name their wives or mothers *augustae* until 383, when Theodosios I revived both the title and the coin type.²⁹ In a series of high-value *nomismata* and low-value *nummi* issued by the eastern mints, Theodosios's wife, the *augusta* Flacilla, appeared on coins from 383 until her death four years later (Figure 3).³⁰ The coinage shows the same type of profile bust portrait on the obverse as had the Helena and the Fausta coins, and the legend on the reverse, *salus reipublicae*, repeats the words found on an earlier Fausta coin as well. The personification, however, is now victory, and Christian victory of a very imperial and Constantinian sort, as indicated by the *chi-rho* – a reference to Constantine's



Figure 3: *Nomisma*: Flacilla (obverse); *salus reipublicae* (reverse) (383–7).

adoption of the first two letters of Christ's name, *chi* (X) and *rho* (P) in Greek, as insignia on shields and on his standard during battle – on victory's shield. Here, then, the imperial female portrait participated in a campaign to align Theodosios and his family with the old and already-by-then venerable Constantinian house:³¹ the numismatic Flacilla not only guaranteed the safety and victory of the republic but also – backed by the Constantinian *chi-rho* and cast as the visual successor to Helena and as the continuator of her title – assured all those who handled the coins that with her family the prestige of the Constantinian house had been restored.

The use of Flacilla on coins to cement dynastic links continues the pattern seen already in the Constantinian coinage, which itself perpetuated older Roman practice. It is also true, however, that in the fourth and early fifth centuries images meant to evoke associations with the Constantinian house virtually always involved women. Either the links were made through images of women, as on the Flacilla coin, or they were expressed in imperial female building commissions.³² Both of these roles pay tribute to Helena's lasting (and, indeed, growing) prestige, which itself inspired, and was significantly augmented by, the legend of her discovery of the True Cross that surfaced in the 390s.³³

Allusions to Constantinian symbolism were continued in later empress coins issued for various female members of the Theodosian house, most notably Pulcheria, sister of Theodosios II and *augusta* from 414 until her death in 453, who took particular care to associate herself with Helena.³⁴ Pulcheria's campaign is evident in many media, one of which is the coinage minted in her name.³⁵ The early *nomismata* (414–19) continue the formula favoured by Flacilla,³⁶ but from 420

the reverse shows either a personification of victory holding a long cross or, in 430 and 442/3, a personification of Constantinople holding an orb surmounted by a cross (the *globus cruciger*), a motif for which Philip Grierson and Melinda Mays believe that Pulcheria may have been responsible.³⁷ Victory holding a long cross appears as well on the coins of Pulcheria's brother, and on one level certainly refers to the cross that Theodosios II erected (according to the contemporary historian Sokrates, at Pulcheria's instigation) on Golgotha, in exchange for which the bishop of Jerusalem is said to have sent him relics of the right arm of St Stephen the protomartyr.³⁸ On another and more important level, both of these crosses allude to the True Cross – which Helena was by then believed to have discovered in Jerusalem.³⁹ The latter association was certainly appreciated by Pulcheria's contemporaries, and the *augusta* was duly christened the 'new Helena' by the Council of Chalcedon in 451; she was the first woman to achieve this title, which henceforth became a commonplace in Byzantine imperial rhetoric.⁴⁰ The coinage suggests (and this suggestion is corroborated by various other sources) that the Council did not dream up the epithet without help; instead, Pulcheria's designation as the 'new Helena' seems to have been the result of a concerted effort on the *augusta*'s part to attain such recognition.⁴¹ The *nomismata* that show Pulcheria with the cross-bearing victory or Constantinople holding the *globus cruciger* are rare examples of coin formulas that may actually have been inspired by the *augusta* herself.

As the mid fifth-century Pulcheria coins suggest, once reintroduced in 383 for Flacilla, empress coinage continued. In fact, it continued for over a century: with few exceptions, between 383 and 491 most imperial wives were given the title *augusta* and were commemorated on the coinage. The coin types continued to portray the empress in profile on the obverse, while the reverses repeated the range of inscriptions and personifications already described, with the notable addition of a cross in a wreath – a clear indication of the lasting association of imperial women with the cross⁴² – that first appeared under Eudoxia (400–404).⁴³ There are, however, two significant deviations from this pattern, both of which tie into issues of succession. They are provided by the gold *nomismata* commissioned to celebrate or commemorate the marriages of Marcian and Pulcheria in 450 (Figure 4), and of Anastasios and Ariadne in 491 (Figure 5), both of which show the emperor in military costume on the obverse and the imperial couple flanking Christ on the reverse.⁴⁴



Figure 4: *Nomisma*: Marcian (obverse); Marcian and Pulcheria blessed by Christ (reverse) (450).

The marriage *nomismata* present the emperor as the most important figure: his portrait alone occupied the obverse (and was thus allowed to take precedence over the image of Christ on the reverse) and the emperor also took precedence over the empress in the triple portrait, where he was portrayed standing at the right hand of Christ. The reverse composition was apparently modelled on an earlier *nomisma* struck to celebrate the marriage of Valentinian III and Licinia Eudoxia in 437; here, however, the central figure was not Christ but rather Licinia Eudoxia's father, the senior, eastern emperor Theodosios II.⁴⁵ The substitution is remarkable: despite the imposition of standard imperial protocol, both Marcian and Pulcheria (later followed by Anastasios and Ariadne) share a groundline with and are blessed by Christ, a configuration that does not appear in other media until the late ninth century.⁴⁶ The near-equity between emperor and empress, and their association with Christ, needs to be seen in the context of the marriage coins themselves, which are exceptional commemorative issues: that depicting Marcian and Pulcheria, for example, survives in only one copy.

It is surely no coincidence that these *nomismata* commemorated marriages whereby the empress legitimised the emperor. When Theodosios II died without issue in 450, his sister Pulcheria (an *augusta* since 414, as we have seen) selected and married Marcian and thereby legitimised his succession to the throne. When Leo II died at the age of seven in 474, only shortly after the death of his grandfather Leo I earlier that year, the throne passed to his father Zeno, and his mother Ariadne (who was Leo I's daughter) was named *augusta*. On Zeno's death in 491, Ariadne married Anastasios, and it was her status



Figure 5: *Nomisma*: Anastasios (obverse); Anastasios and Ariadne blessed by Christ (reverse) (491).

as *augusta* – triply confirmed by her status as the daughter of one emperor, mother of another, and wife of a third – that legitimised the succession of her second husband Anastasios. Both Pulcheria and Ariadne were, in other words, *augustae* in their own rights and daughters of a previous emperor; in each case, the *augusta* legitimised the *augustus* through marriage rather than the reverse. The selection of Christ to sanction the process must be credited to Pulcheria and Marcian, and seems likely to reflect Pulcheria’s early pledge of virginity and claim to be a ‘bride of Christ’;⁴⁷ parallels with the earlier Licinia Eudoxia marriage coins suggest, at any rate, that Christ’s role here is as a familial marriage sponsor as well as a guarantor of its success.

The Theodosian house, which ended in 518 with the accession of Justin I, had been able (admittedly tenuously) to claim continuity with the Constantinian dynasty, and this claim was important to the legitimacy of the house: it was one reason, as we have seen, for the revival of the empress coins under Theodosios I. The often-fragile links between the imperial family and the old Roman senatorial aristocracy that had been sustained for nearly two centuries were, however, broken once and for all with the advent of Justin I.⁴⁸ This break is marked not just by a change in the ruling family’s genealogical background, but also by the total absence of empress coins during the reigns of Justin I (518–27) and Justinian I (527–65).

While it might be tempting to interpret this hiatus as a visual signal meant to differentiate the new rulers, with their roots in the military elite of the provinces, from the old urban aristocratic families, the evidence simply does not support this opposition. Anastasios had not in fact minted coins that portrayed the *augusta* Ariadne (who died only in 515) since 491, the year of their marriage: by the time Justin

I came to the throne, empress coins had not been struck for nearly thirty years. In addition, an entirely new form of low-denomination coinage had been introduced in 498. Throughout the remainder of Anastasios's reign, this invariably portrayed the emperor on the obverse, and an indication of the coin's worth on the reverse: E, the Greek number five, on the *pentanummium*, with a value five times that of the old *nummus*; I, the Greek number ten, on the *decanummium*, with a value ten times that of the old *nummus*; K, the Greek number twenty, on the half-*folles*, with a value twenty times that of the old *nummus*; and M, the Greek number forty, on the *folles* itself (Figures 6–8), with a value forty times that of the old *nummus*.⁴⁹ Perhaps to accustom its public to the new coinage, the sequence shows little variation; it never incorporates an image of the empress, and neither do the higher denomination coins. Rather than marking change, then, the omission of the *augustae* Euphemia and Theodora on the coinage of Justin I and Justinian I seems to continue the pattern instigated with the reorganisation of the mints in 498 under Anastasios.

It is the rejuvenation of empress coins in 565, rather than the absence of them earlier in the century, that is striking, as is their new form: when empress coins begin again to be minted after the death of Justinian in 565, they look quite different from the earlier versions. Between 565 and 641, a period that encompasses the reigns of five imperial couples, the empress no longer appears alone on coins at all; instead, when she appears she is joined by her husband: either the imperial couple are shown together on the obverse of the coin (Figure 6), or the emperor appears on the obverse and the empress on the reverse. With only one exception (a *folles* and half-*folles* struck in Carthage in 572/3 for Justin II and Sophia),⁵⁰ the emperor is named but the empress remains anonymous.

This phase represents a new departure, which has been interpreted as representing the shared nature of imperial prestige and authority under Justin II and Sophia,⁵¹ during whose reign the type was instigated,⁵² although it might also be read as a sign that the empress was no longer important in her own right at all. At least one of the messages that these coins were apparently intended to convey, however, continued a familiar pattern. As under the Theodosians, the reintroduction of empress coinage runs parallel to the association of the imperial family with Constantine and Helena: in response to a gift sent to the pope by Justin II and Sophia, they were dubbed the new Constantine and the new Helena by Venantius Fortunatus.⁵³ The new



Figure 6: *Follis*: Justin II and Sophia (obverse); M with year 574/5 (reverse).

portrait type itself, with the imperial couple together, may in fact represent an attempt to invoke Constantine-and-Helena, whose symbolic resonance was by now usually as a pair rather than as individuals. Be that as it may, once the coin type was re-established, the practice and the evocation of Constantine were sustained by Justin's successor, Tiberius Constantine, given his second name by Justin II in 574 when he was declared Caesar, and his wife Ino-Anastasia (578–82), who apparently re-named one of their daughters Constantina.⁵⁴ Coins with the double portrait are, however, preserved only from the mint at Thessalonike in 579,⁵⁵ and seem to have commemorated the beginning of their rule, after which the portraiture is limited to Tiberius. Maurice (582–602), who married the daughter Constantina, also continued the double enthroned portrait on his coins. Here too the datable examples appear only at the beginning of the reign, and were minted in Thessalonike.⁵⁶

This practice contrasts sharply with the Justin II/Sophia issues, which were numerous and continued to be minted throughout Justin II's reign.⁵⁷ The consistent use of the joint portrait between 565 and 578 evidently impressed the pattern on subsequent rulers, and it may be recalled that the two *augusti* who followed Justin II were in the way of being family members – Tiberius was Justin II's adopted son, while Maurice was both married to Tiberius's daughter and, perhaps,

favoured by Sophia herself⁵⁸ – who may have continued the coin type as a visible means of promoting familial continuity. That the frequency of issue was not maintained suggests, however, a re-evaluation of the double portrait under Tiberius and Maurice. It now seems to have been considered appropriate as an inauguration image, in at least some parts of the empire, but not as a normal issue. The *augusta* has been subsumed into an expression of imperial unity, necessary only at the beginning of a reign; she is not, on the Tiberius and Maurice coins, an essential component of, or even a participant in, the empire's day-to-day ideological programme. In their restricted use as, apparently, commemorative issues, the Tiberius/Anastasia and Maurice/Constantina coins recall the marriage *nomisma* of Anastasios/Ariadne, but subsequent events make it clear that, however rarely they were struck in the last two decades of the sixth century, the significance of the double portrait was not forgotten.

Phokas, who usurped the throne in 602, crowned his wife Leontia immediately and promptly issued copper coins bearing their joint portrait (Figure 7). These were struck in all of the mints then operating in the eastern empire, some of which continued to issue them until the final year of Phokas's reign.⁵⁹ The decision to mint coins portraying the imperial couple throughout the east and for virtually



Figure 7: *Follis*: Phokas and Leontia (obverse); M with year 602/3 (reverse).

all of the reign was certainly intentional, and fits into the larger picture of Phokas's numismatic patronage, which included the revival of individualised portraiture.⁶⁰ At least in part, Phokas presumably returned to coin types sanctified by tradition in an attempt to legitimise his abrupt and irregular rise to power by associating himself with the authority of the past. This is the context for the coins that portray the imperial couple together, which demonstrate that the *augusta* continued to play an important role in expressions of imperial unity, but also suggest that when issues of dynastic continuity, well-being and stability were at stake, the role of the empress increased correspondingly. On the Phokas/Leontia coins, the *augusta* was, once again, used to reinforce imperial authority and dynastic pretensions.

The use of coins to promote dynasty continued under Herakleios (610–41), who himself usurped the throne in 610, which suggests that it was viewed as a successful ploy. Herakleios's son, born in 612 and called Herakleios the new Constantine, was crowned in 613 and appeared immediately on coins; Herakleios's first wife Eudokia died shortly after the boy's birth. At some point thereafter, the emperor married his niece, Martina, who was named *augusta* and appeared on coins from 616 to 629 (Figure 8); a second son, designated Caesar in 632 and *augustus* in 638, appears on coins of the last decade of the



Figure 8: *Follis*. Herakleios Constantine, Herakleios, Martina (obverse); M (reverse) (615–24).

reign.⁶¹ Martina's omission after 629 corresponds with a change in type that, in Grierson's words, 'marks a major attempt at monetary reform';⁶² it also followed Herakleios's triumphal return from Jerusalem after his defeat of the Persians, and the emperor now appears in military costume.

The unnamed empresses on this group of late sixth- and early seventh-century coins served almost exclusively as symbols of continuity and stability for the state, and it is significant that *augustae* who were not imperial wives do not appear on coins of this period at all.⁶³ To an extent, their anonymity serves to downplay their potential roles as actual mothers; the anonymous empress-as-symbol on the coins, standing by her man, can have stamped upon her whatever messages seem appropriate: she is, for example, perfectly suited to be cast as an imperial attribute that allows the portrait to evoke the idealised rule of Constantine-and-Helena. The empress portraits had always conveyed abstract and ideological messages – Helena was not just mother of Constantine, she was also the security of the republic – but it is important to signal that, in the years around 600, the abstract ideological messages subsumed whatever personal underpinning they had had in late antiquity.

After 629, there are no empress coins of any description for a century and a half. Neither the immediate followers of Herakleios nor any of the Isaurians who instigated Iconoclasm issued coins portraying women. Though dynastic continuity was promoted through coins, the message was no longer carried by the empress but rather by portrayals of the heir apparent, the reigning emperor's son, a process that had already begun under Herakleios.⁶⁴

The next empress coins do not appear, in fact, until 780, with the empress Eirene. No coins with her portrait were struck during the lifetime of her husband Leo IV, but after his death in 780 – when Eirene began to act as regent for her nine-year-old son Constantine VI – coins bearing her effigy, along with that of her son, immediately appeared.⁶⁵ For ten years (780–90), Constantine VI and Eirene appear together as bust portraits on the obverse of coins, both holding the *globus cruciger* (Figure 9); the reverse normally celebrates familial ancestors. Constantine VI takes precedence over his mother, but even in the coins struck in 790, by which point he was nineteen years old, he is shown beardless to signal his relative immaturity. The inscriptions, which designate Constantine VI as *caesar*, *basileus* and *despotes*, then Eirene as *augusta*, unusually begin on the reverse and



Figure 9: *Nomisma*: Constantine VI and Eirene (obverse); Constantine V, Leo III and Leo IV (reverse) (780–90).

conclude on the obverse, so that Eirene's name appears on the front of the coin. This oddity aside, the coins return to one version of the numismatic iconography of the last series of empress coins. The major differences are the appearance of frontal bust portraits in place of standing or enthroned figures and the placement of ancestors on the reverse; but neither of these features is an innovation: both derived from numismatic practices during Iconoclasm.⁶⁶

Things changed slightly between 790 and 792 when Constantine attempted to assert his authority. It is an indication of how important small changes on coins can be that this turning point is marked not by the removal of Eirene from coins – she remains – but by a shift in her attributes: between 790 and 792 Eirene is simply no longer given



Figure 10: *Nomisma*: Constantine VI and Eirene (obverse); Constantine V, Leo III and Leo IV (reverse) (790–2).

the sign of highest authority, the *globus cruciger* (Figure 10).⁶⁷ Roles reversed again between 792 and 797. Coins now show Eirene, labelled *augusta*, on the obverse and relegate Constantine (labelled *basileus*) to the reverse (Figure 11). Despite his age (twenty-one in 792, twenty-six by 797), he is still shown beardless, with the implication that he is too young to rule. Again, a small detail on a small coin; but again, one with large implications.⁶⁸ Finally, in 797, Constantine VI was blinded and deposed; after this, Eirene ruled alone until her own deposition in 802. This change of status, as is widely known, was commemorated by a series of coins, minted in Constantinople between 797 and 802, that show Eirene on both sides (Figure 12).⁶⁹ She is



Figure 11: *Nomisma*: Eirene (obverse); Constantine VI (reverse) (792–7).



Figure 12: *Nomisma*: Eirene (obverse); Eirene (reverse) (797–802).

now labelled *basilissa*, the first time that this designation appears on coins.

The double portrait has occasioned considerable comment, sometimes suggesting that it demonstrates Eirene's over-ambitious and power-hungry nature. Yet the new numismatic formula went unremarked at the time, and, more important, was copied by three subsequent emperors, Michael I in 811, Leo V in 813 and Michael II in 821, none of whom have been characterised as overly ambitious or power-hungry.⁷⁰ To its Byzantine audience, the double portrait was accepted, and found to provide a useful new pattern. Taken together, Eirene's coins show how precise the messages carried by coins could be, and they are also informative about the construction of gender in modern scholarship.

The empress coins minted between 324 and 802 consistently stress the role of the *augusta* in promoting messages of security, well-being, stability and harmony; she embodies domestic virtues applied to the state. In the early issues, the women appear alone, backed by a personification or, later, a cross that explicitly supported these roles. The marriage *nomismata* of 437, 450 and 491 then introduce the double imperial portrait, which was adopted as the standard formula from 565 until 629. With this, the empress loses her identity: both her name and her personal attributes disappear, as indeed do any individualising characteristics in the portraiture itself. She has been modelled into an implicit rather than an explicit sign of concord and continuity. Eirene's coins restore a measure of balance, and one that will have repercussions in coins minted throughout the ninth century, when not only does the duplicated portrait continue, but imperial women return again to coins.⁷¹

Confining ourselves to the coinage considered here, however, it is clear that even beyond the consistent messages of state well-being carried by all of the empress coins, certain other structural features remain constant. Imperial women were always available as an ideological resource, and the mints keep coming back to them. Concomitantly, when empresses appear on coins, they are always meaningful, and they often appear at points of fracture or transition. Images of imperial women seem somehow to have bestowed legitimacy on husbands, sons or, in the isolated case of Eirene, themselves. Symbols of legitimisation are always important, and particularly so during crises of succession, which, as we have seen, regularly called forth imperial female images on coins. That this was at least sometimes

recognised by the *augustae* themselves is suggested by the cases of Pulcheria and Eirene, who used coins minted in their names to precise ends: Pulcheria valorised her association with Helena and the cross; Eirene, more traditionally, legitimised her claim to the throne.

Notes

The genesis of this study was Helen Tobler's BA dissertation, 'Images of Empresses on Byzantine Coins' (University of Birmingham, 1997); a revised version was presented at Leeds in 1998 by Leslie Brubaker. The authors thank Ruth Macrides and Paul Magdalino, in whose house that version was written, for stimulating discussions of coin imagery, and Chris Wickham, for perceptive comments on the text.

1. M. Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c. 300–1450* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985), pp. 284–5, 294–6, 466. For convenience, we use 'copper' to cover the various types of base-metal coins. Silver coins were less common, particularly in the fifth and sixth centuries, and will not be considered here.
2. M. Alföldi, *Die constantinische Goldprägung: Untersuchungen zu ihrer Bedeutung für Kaiserpolitik und Hofkunst* (Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, Mainz, 1963).
3. See J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990), pp. 117–20, 447–9, and 'Production, Distribution and Demand in the Byzantine World, c. 660–840', in *The Long Eighth Century*, ed. I. L. Hansen and C. J. Wickham (Brill, Leiden, 2000).
4. On coins as publicity, see further M. Grant, *Roman Imperial Money* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, 1954), pp. 7–8.
5. J. D. Breckenridge, *The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II* (Numismatic Notes and Monographs 144, New York, 1959), and D. Wright, 'The True Face of Constantine the Great', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 41 (1987), pp. 493–507, are exceptions.
6. G. Zacos and A. Vegler, 'Marriage Solidi of the Fifth Century', *Numismatic Circular* 68 (1960), pp. 73–4; K. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982), pp. 32–4, 65–7, 110, 123, 129–30, 209, 221; L. Garland, *Byzantine Empresses, Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527–1204* (Routledge, London, 1999), pp. 50–51, 62, 83, 99, 102.
7. For example, Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*; Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*; B. Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium, 1025–1204: Power, Patronage and Ideology* (Longman, Harlow, 1999). More generally, on the use of the visual to tell us about the voiceless, see R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (Routledge, London, 1994), and, for the period under consideration here, L. Brubaker, 'Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries', in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. L. James (Routledge, London, 1997), pp. 52–75.
8. R. J. A. Talbert, *The Senate of Imperial Rome* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984), p. 379, notes that in republican Rome the senate had been responsible for coin design but that this responsibility had been passed to the emperor at the beginning of the principate. Imperial responsibility, perhaps mediated through the state bureaucracy, continued in Byzantium.
9. In practice, regional mints apparently had some latitude in the selection of coin types to stamp: see below.
10. See P. Grierson and M. Mays, *Catalogue of Late Roman Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington DC, 1992), pp. 73–8, for coins minted between 393 and 491; P. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection II, 1–2* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,

- Washington DC, 1968), pp. 68–70, for coins minted between 602 and 717; P. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection III, 1–2* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington DC, 1973), pp. 106–16, for the period between 717 and 1081.
11. See Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, pp. 127–30.
 12. Discussion in Grierson, *Catalogue III*, p. 9.
 13. See A. Cameron, 'The Construction of Court Ritual: The Byzantine *Book of Ceremonies*', in *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, ed. D. Cannadine and S. R. F. Price (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987), pp. 106–36; G. Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre: Étude sur le 'césaropapisme' byzantin* (Gallimard, Paris, 1996).
 14. R. C. Blockley (ed.), *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire II: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus: Text, Translation and Historiographical Notes* (Francis Cairns, Liverpool, 1983), p. 246–7.
 15. See S. Runciman, 'Some Notes on the Role of the Empress', *Eastern Churches Review*, 4 (1972), pp. 119–24.
 16. S. Mashev, 'Die Staatsrechtliche Stellung der byzantinischen Kaiserinnen', *Byzantinoslavica*, 27 (1966), pp. 308–43, esp. p. 308; J. Beaucamp, *Le Statut de la femme à Byzance 1* (De Boccard, Paris, 1990), p. 274.
 17. The bibliographies on Constantine and on Constantinople are vast; for convenient surveys, see A. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium I* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991), pp. 498–500, 508–12.
 18. See Grant, *Roman Imperial Money*, pp. 133–48, esp. p. 142.
 19. See Mashev, 'Staatsrechtliche Stellung', p. 309; and Runciman, 'Some Notes', p. 119. D. Missiou, 'Über die Institutionelle Rolle der byzantinischen Kaiserin', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, 32 (1982), pp. 489–97, argued (incorrectly) that the title was only conferred to imperial wives who bore heirs. By the middle Byzantine period, an *augusta* was necessary for certain court ceremonies (for which reason, after the death of his second wife, Leo VI (886–912) elevated his daughter Anna to the rank) but it is unclear when this system originated: see E. Bensamner, 'La Titulature de l'Impératrice et sa Signification', *Byzantion*, 46 (1976), pp. 243–91, esp. p. 276.
 20. See Bensamner, 'Titulature de l'Impératrice', p. 270, and p. 589 above.
 21. P. Bruun (ed.), *The Roman Imperial Coinage VII: Constantine and Licinius AD 313–337* (Spink and Son, London, 1966), pp. 53, 116, 137, 205, 209, 263, 266, 475, 519, 571, 615, 621, 624, 690, 709 (copper coins), 383, 613 (*nomismata*), pl. 18 (no. 12). Sometimes both *salus* and *spes* are invoked: Alföldi, *Die constantinische Goldprägung*, p. 194 (nos 441–2), fig. 157.
 22. Grant, *Roman Imperial Money*, pp. 125, 141, 162, pls I,6; XIII,3.
 23. See M. B. Flory, 'Livia's shrine to Concordia and the Porticus Liviae', *Historia*, 33 (1984), pp. 309–30; K. Cooper, 'Insinuations of Womanly Influence: An Aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 82 (1992), pp. 150–64; S. Fischler, 'Social Stereotypes and Historical Analysis: The Case of the Imperial Women at Rome', in *Women in Ancient Societies, An Illusion of the Night*, ed. L. J. Archer, S. Fischler and M. Wyke (Macmillan Press, Houndmills, 1994), pp. 115–33, esp. p. 129.
 24. Bruun (ed.), *Roman Imperial Coinage VII*, pp. 53, 116, 137, 205–6, 209, 212–13, 264, 266–70, 325, 330, 385, 387, 447–8, 450, 453, 475, 519, 551–4, 557, 571, 615, 621, 624, 626, 647, 649–51, 689–91, 709–11 (copper coins), 383, 476, 514, 517, 613 (*nomismata*), pls 16 (no. 149), 17 (no. 110).
 25. J. Kent (ed.), *The Roman Imperial Coinage VIII, The Family of Constantine I AD 337–364* (Spink and Son, London, 1981), pp. 143, 250–51, 449–50, pl. 21 (no. 33); the coins were struck in Constantinople, Rome and Trier.
 26. Kent (ed.), *Roman Imperial Coinage VIII*, pp. 142, 250–51, 449–50, pls 1, 21 (nos 43, 51); minted at Constantinople, Rome, and Trier.
 27. J. W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of her Finding of the True Cross* (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1992), pp. 43–4.

28. Julian was the son of Iulius Constantius (second son of Theodora) and his second wife Basilina: A. M. H. Jones, J. R. Martindale and J. Morris, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire I: AD 260–395* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 477–8.
29. See, in general, Grierson and Mays, *Late Roman Coins*, pp. 6–8.
30. J. W. E. Pearce, *The Roman Imperial Coinage IX: Valentinian I – Theodosius I* (Spink and Son, London, 1968), pp. 153, 184, 195–6, 226, 229, 233, 257, 259, 261, 284, 289, 291 (copper coins), struck at Antioch, Constantinople, Heraklea, Nikomedia, Siscia and Thessalonike; pp. 225, 231 (*nomismata*), struck at Constantinople. A gold and a silver coin with Flacilla on the obverse, the *chi-rho* in a wreath on the reverse were also minted in Constantinople (Pearce, *Roman Imperial Coinage IX*, 232). A few of the copper coins replace victory with a standing portrait of the empress: Pearce, *Roman Imperial Coinage IX*, pp. 197, 245, 261, 302 (from Alexandria, Cyzicus, Heraklea, Nikomedia).
31. See Brubaker, ‘Memories’, esp. p. 60, and Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, pp. 31–3, who, however, finds the *chi-rho* imagery ‘trivial’ (p. 32).
32. Brubaker, ‘Memories’.
33. Drijvers, *Helena*, pp. 79–180, esp. p. 95; L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1997), pp. 95–103.
34. See A. Williams, ‘The Roles and Functions of Early Byzantine Imperial Women in the Succession to the Throne’ (MPhil dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1998).
35. Grierson and Mays, *Late Roman Coins*, pp. 152–4, pls 18–19.
36. One critical distinguishing feature is the hand that emerges from the top of the coin and holds a diadem over the *augusta*’s head, a motif that had appeared on coins minted by Pulcheria’s father Arcadius (emperor 395–408) in his youth and on the coins of her mother Eudoxia (*augusta* 400–404). On its significance, see I. Kalavrezou, ‘Helping Hands for the Empire: Imperial Ceremonies and the Cult of Relics at the Byzantine Court’, in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. H. Maguire (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, 1997), pp. 63–4.
37. Grierson and Mays, *Late Roman Coins*, p. 152.
38. See K. Holum, ‘Pulcheria’s Crusade and the Ideology of Imperial Victory’, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 18 (1977), pp. 153–72, esp. pp. 162–3; Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, pp. 109–10.
39. Brubaker, ‘Memories’, p. 62.
40. See Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, p. 216.
41. See note 34 above.
42. The cross is not regularly associated with emperors on coins until the reign of Tiberius II (578–82).
43. Grierson and Mays, *Late Roman Coins*, pp. 133–5, pl. 11. On the other empress coins of the period, Grierson and Mays, *Late Roman Coins*, pp. 6–9, 155–6, 165–6, 170–71, 176, pls 18, 23.
44. Zacos and Vegler, ‘Marriage solidi of the fifth century’, pp. 73–4; A. Bellinger, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection I: Anastasius I to Maurice 491–602* (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, 1966), p. 4, pl. 1; Grierson and Mays, *Late Roman Coins*, p. 158.
45. Grierson and Mays, *Late Roman Coins*, pp. 145, 158, pl. 15. Four examples survive.
46. See L. Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), pp. 158–9.
47. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, p. 209; and on Pulcheria’s relation to Christ, K. Cooper, ‘Contesting the Nativity: Wives, Virgins, and Pulcheria’s *Imitatio Mariae*’, *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, 19 (1998), pp. 31–43.
48. The forced retirement of the last western emperor (Romulus Augustus) in 476 had already shattered imperial continuity in the west.
49. See, for example, Bellinger, *Catalogue I*, p. 2.
50. Bellinger, *Catalogue I*, pp. 254–5.

51. A. Cameron, 'The Empress Sophia', *Byzantion*, 45 (1975), pp. 5–21, esp. p. 11; closely followed by Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, pp. 40–57.
52. Bellinger, *Catalogue I*, pp. 204 (silver half *siliqua*, minted in Constantinople); 204–14, 226–31, 234–7, 243–5, 254–6 (*folles*, minted in Constantinople, Nicomedia, Cyzicus, Antioch, Carthage); 214–17, 221–5, 231–3, 238–9, 245–7, 255, 257–8 (half-*folles*, minted in Constantinople, Thessalonike, Nicomedia, Cyzicus, Antioch, Carthage, Constantine in Numidia, Rome); 248–9, 255–6 (*decanummius*, minted in Antioch, Carthage).
53. Discussion in A. Cameron, 'The Early Religious Policies of Justin II', in *The Orthodox Churches and the West*, ed. D. Baker, *Studies in Church History*, 13 (1976), pp. 57–9; M. Whitby, 'Images for Emperors in Late Antiquity: A Search for New Constantine', in *New Constantines: the Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th–13th Centuries*, ed. P. Magdalino (Variorum, Aldershot, 1994), p. 89.
54. Whitby, 'Images for Emperors', pp. 83–93. Helena was, however, rejected as the new name of Tiberius's wife in favour of Anastasia.
55. Bellinger, *Catalogue I*, p. 277 (half-*folles*).
56. Bellinger, *Catalogue I*, pp. 373–4 (*folles*, minted in Cherson); 320, 373 (half-*folles*, minted in Thessalonike, Cherson); 374–5 (*pentanummia*, minted in Cherson). The Thessalonikan coins were minted in 582/3; those from Cherson cannot be precisely dated.
57. See note 52 above.
58. The latter point is controversial: see M. Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and his Historian. Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988), pp. 7–8.
59. Grierson, *Catalogue II,1*, pp. 147, 162–3, 176, 180, 186–8 (*folles* struck in Constantinople and Nicomedia 602–4; in Cyzicus 602–3; in Antioch 602–9); 166–7, 174–5, 179, 184, 189–90 (half-*folles* struck in Constantinople, Nicomedia and Cyzicus 602–3; in Thessalonike 603–5; in Antioch 602–8); 190–91 (*decanummius* struck in Antioch 602–9).
60. See Grierson, *Catalogue II,1*, pp. 89–90.
61. Grierson, *Catalogue II,1*, pp. 216–383, with a chart on p. 226 setting out the range of the empress *folles* clearly.
62. Grierson, *Catalogue II,1*, p. 228. Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 63, believes that Martina's omission was due to her unpopularity in Constantinople. There is no evidence for this.
63. For example, Epiphania-Eudokia, born in 611 to Herakleios and his first wife, crowned *augusta* in 612: J. R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire III: AD 527–641* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992), pp. 445–6. C. Zuckerman, 'La Petit Augusta et le Turc: Epiphania-Eudocie sur les Monnaies d'Héraclius', *Revue Numismatique*, 150 (1995), pp. 113–26, has been countered by Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 255, note 10. The practice was revived under Theophilos (829–42): see Grierson, *Catalogue III,1*, pp. 407–8, 415–16.
64. For Herakleios, see above; for the Iconoclast emperors, see, for example, Grierson, *Catalogue III,1*, pp. 226–30, 232–4, 291–2, 294–5, 325–6.
65. Grierson, *Catalogue III,1*, pp. 337–8.
66. References in the preceding two notes.
67. Grierson, *Catalogue III,1*, p. 338.
68. Grierson, *Catalogue III,1*, pp. 338–9.
69. Grierson, *Catalogue III,1*, pp. 181, 327–48; Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 87.
70. Grierson, *Catalogue III,1*, pp. 367, 375, 394.
71. For *augustae* on the coins of Theophilos, see note 63 above; for Theodora (mother of Michael III) and Eudokia (wife of Basil I) see Grierson, *Catalogue III,1*, pp. 461–5 and *III,2*, pp. 489–90.