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China Dennington April 12, 2022

An Inconvenient Saint: Empress Irene and Legacies of Power in Medieval Byzantium

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Abstract

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During the 8th century, Irene of Athens rose to power as the first woman to rule the Byzantine empire alone. A unique confluence of circumstances allowed Irene to create space for herself to function as a female emperor in what had previously been a role limited to men, with minimal censure from within the empire on the basis of her gender. Irene was not even of royal blood, which makes her accomplishments all the more impressive. Irene married into the imperial family as a teenager. Following the demise of her iconoclast husband Leo III (775 – 780 CE), Irene asserted her own pro-iconophile beliefs during her rule as regent for her son Constantine VI (780 – 797 CE). Her efforts led to the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE, during which worship using the physical images of saints was confirmed as the true doctrine of the Church. By declaring an end to iconoclasm, Irene secured her place as an iconophile saint. While she ruled for years as regent, she ascended to the throne and ruled on her own for five years after blinding and killing her son Constantine VI in 797 CE. Proponents of iconophile beliefs, like the historian Theophanes, had no choice but to continue to champion her as a successful iconophile, despite her brutality against her son. Irene did not fit neatly into the narratives of her contemporaries, which results in an unusually nuanced portrait of her in the *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* that still often reveals the framework projected onto her as a Byzantine woman.

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Introduction

During the 8th century, Irene of Athens rose to power as the first woman to rule the Byzantine empire alone. A unique confluence of circumstances allowed Irene to create space for herself to function as a female emperor in what had previously been a role limited to men, with minimal censure from within the empire on the basis of her gender. Irene was not even of royal blood, which makes her accomplishments all the more impressive. Irene married into the imperial family as a teenager. Following the demise of her iconoclast husband Leo III (775 – 780 CE), Irene asserted her own pro-iconophile beliefs during her rule as regent for her son Constantine VI (780 – 797 CE). Her efforts led to the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE, during which worship using the physical images of saints was confirmed as the true doctrine of the Church. By declaring an end to iconoclasm, Irene secured her place as an iconophile saint.

While she ruled for years as regent, Irene eventually became sole emperor when she violently transgressed one of the most sacred signifiers of Byzantine femininity: motherhood.[1] After blinding and killing her son Constantine VI in 797 CE, she ascended to the throne and ruled on her own for five years before being deposed by another member of the Byzantine government. In the years immediately following her death in 803 CE, Irene's claim to iconophile sainthood stood because of the re-emergence of iconoclasm. Proponents of iconophile beliefs, like the historian Theophanes, had no choice but to continue to champion her as a successful iconophile, despite her brutality against her son. Irene did not fit neatly into the narratives of her contemporaries, which results in an unusually nuanced portrait of her in the *Chronicle of*

[1] Peter Hatlie, "Images of Motherhood and Self in Byzantine Literature," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 63 (2009): 43-44.

Theophanes Confessor that still often reveals the framework projected onto her as a Byzantine woman.

My first serious engagement with Byzantine history took place in my AP World History course in high school when I chose to do a project on the 5th century Theodora. It happened to be a primary source project, so I ended up reading Procopius, which opened up a new world of primary sources for me. I was used to reading mostly secondary sources and so the idea that I could access the translated words of people who lived hundreds of years ago was astonishing. During my first semester in college I was lucky enough to take a course on Byzantine history with Professor Mary Grace DuPree, which allowed me to delve further into the subject matter. Throughout my time in college, I continually found myself drawn to gender, sainthood, and imperial women in a multitude of contexts, which is what led me to the idea for this particular project. I am fascinated with Empress Irene because I believe that her intelligent navigation of her world — showcased through her management of conflict and her use of female religious imagery to bolster her power — offers modern historians an opportunity to understand the lives of imperial women in new ways.

Chapter I. The Historiography of Gender & Power in Medieval Byzantium

The reign of Irene of Athens as the first sole female emperor of the Eastern Roman empire marked a turning point in Byzantine history. Her success in carving out a space for herself rested upon the clever utilization of religious tropes and established cultural roles for women. Female members of the imperial family had been reshaping and utilizing the implications of these gendered associations since the lifetime of Pulcheria (r. 450 – 453 CE), near the inception of the Eastern Roman Empire as an independent entity from the Roman empire of the west. Irene's impact cannot and should not be underestimated, both in the image she projected, how she was perceived, and the new cultural space she crafted for subsequent female voices. The long-standing association between imperial women and Mary allowed Irene to occupy a number of roles as a sole female emperor, including serving as an intercessor between the heavenly kingdom and the earthly kingdom and serving as a pious defender of the Byzantine empire.

Reconstructing the history of women, even prominent women such as Irene, often proves a challenge because direct evidence already is scarce from this period and sources written by women themselves are even rarer. Primary sources must be approached in a way that keeps this in mind. Even sources that are clearly not meant to be entirely factual hold valuable information about cultural norms and shifts in those norms if analyzed with a critical eye. This effort requires a thorough knowledge and understanding of Byzantine attitudes surrounding gender in order to recreate an approximation of how imperial women may have accumulated power. Averil Cameron discusses the value and use of discourse analysis and provides an example of it in her

article "Sacred and Profane Love: Thoughts on Byzantine Gender".[2] Cameron defines discourse analysis as "looking at the underlying rhetorical strategies of common literary and other representations which may be taken to reveal the inner concerns of a society."[3] Since so many of the primary sources I will be examining may be broadly put in the category of literary sources, I believe this strategy will be particularly useful.

Thankfully a number of scholars have turned their attention to the subject of gender in the Byzantine world over the past thirty years. A number of pivotal works by writers such as Judith Herrin, Leslie Brubaker, and Leonora Neville have reexamined anachronistic assumptions. Herrin's book *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* makes the case for a special link between women and icons. This linkage is somewhat controversial and will be discussed further, as obviously women were important to the championing of icons. The fact that Irene brought the first period of iconoclasm to an end in 787 CE and that the 9th century Empress Theodora enacted an end to the second period of iconoclasm in 843 CE furthered this association.

Herrin also paints Irene as a successful ruler by examining her reign through the lens of its military, social, and economic elements. This is an approach to Irene's life that, surprisingly, had not previously been utilized in great detail. Most previous work on Irene tends to center on certain scandalous focal points of her life without evaluating her reign as a whole, as is done for most other emperors. Giving Irene agency in her own life and choices, while also endeavoring to fully comprehend the pressures that surrounded her, will ultimately provide a more accurate and interesting portrait of the first female emperor to rule the Eastern Roman empire in her own

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[2] Averil Cameron, "Sacred and Profane Love: Thoughts on Byzantine Gender," in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (New York: Routledge, 1997), 7-17.

[3] Cameron, "Sacred and Profane Love," 7.

right. Herrin's analysis is crucial for looking at the cultural and political ramifications of Irene's reign on elite women in the years that followed. More recently, Herrin also published a work entitled *Unrivalled Influence: Women in Byzantium* which features a collection of her essays on topics ranging from women and Eastern Orthodoxy to imperial women and the workings of the court.[4] This book offers a thoughtful, complex construction of Byzantine imperial womanhood and its relationship to religion.

In "Women and Icons, and Women in Icons," Robin Cormack argues that the linkage between women and icons has been taken too far and that Herrin is fundamentally incorrect about the veneration of icons in the home being carried out primarily by women.[5] While his argument concerning whether common women had any particular allegiance to icons is worth further investigation, his overall point that the positive significance of women in this movement is overblown lacks enough evidence. His conclusion that "What we…read in these texts is to be interpreted as shadowing something much closer to a traditional model of male oppressive strategies" is too simplistic.[6] The association between women and icons extends beyond the ways they were weaponized by men in iconophile texts. To limit the relationship of women and icons to the male weaponization of the idea would occlude the narrative of female Byzantine history that exists beyond the purview of those sources. Even if the inclusion of women as

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[4] Judith Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[5] For more concerning Cormack's argument see Chapter II ("A Human Icon: Irene, Icons, and Imperial Intercession").

[6] Robin Cormack, "Women and Icons, and Women in Icons," in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. By Liz James (New York: Routledge, 1997), 43.

central to the movement began that way, real women were able to harvest that association in concrete ways to further their power.

Gender, of course, cannot be left out of such an analysis. The scholarly literature, however, has advanced past the point of simply seeing Irene as an oddity because of her gender and ignoring the complexities of the way she exercised agency as a ruler. Viewing Irene's rule as an isolated incident ignores and obscures the conditions, strategies, and cultural attitudes concerning women that were in development for three hundred years before she came to the throne in a watershed moment. It also occludes the narrative with concern to the ways imperial Byzantine women worked to shape their own narratives in order to accumulate power for themselves within the established frameworks.[7] Through patronage and public displays of piety, imperial women linked themselves to the figure of Mary in all of her various roles.

Conventions of gender in the historical and religious works of the period give scholars some insight into what the typical attitudes towards women might have been and how women subverted them. Leonora Neville discusses this extensively in *Byzantine Gender,* as well as the perception of eunuchs in terms of gender. Her arguments are solid and foundational to the understanding of Byzantine gender that I will be applying to the primary sources I am analyzing. One common trope often found in saints' lives, for example, is the idea that women could become more like men in their nature by expressing character traits associated with manhood.[8] If a woman excelled in a domain traditionally associated with men, it was allowable and, indeed,

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[7] Leonora Neville, *Byzantine Gender*, (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 60.

[8] Neville, *Byzantine Gender*, 60-64.

celebrated in hagiographical texts as long as the author noted how the saint was overcoming her weak womanly nature. [9]

Numerous facets of Byzantine gender identity appear to be malleable in the eyes of authors of the time. It would be remiss to ignore the presence of eunuchs in the empire when they figure so heavily in the discussion on the Byzantine perspective concerning gender. Eunuchs possessed links to imperial women especially, since most of the empire's small population of eunuchs were to be found serving in the imperial court.[10] Irene aligned herself with eunuchs who helped further her political agenda as well as their own.[11] Eunuchs very distinctly filled the liminal space between male and female, which drew some comparisons to angels, especially because of their roles in the divine order of the court.[12] While not entirely comfortable with these fluidities in gender and gender roles,[13] Byzantine writers were very culturally familiar with them in ways that most western writers were not at the time. This additional element of an established breakage of the gender binary in Byzantine culture contributed to the creation of a framework that possessed an unusual degree of openness to the idea of gender being permeable.

Roland Betancourt explores fluidities in Byzantine gender in his book *Byzantine Intersectionality*. In his chapter "Transgender Lives," Betancourt traces the tradition of gender fluidity in saints' lives such as those of St Marinos and St Matrona of Perge who were both

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[9] Neville, *Byzantine Gender*, 37.

[10] Neville, *Byzantine Gender*, 52.

[11] Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 108-111.

[12] Neville, *Byzantine Gender*, 4.

[13] Neville, *Byzantine Gender,* 52.

assigned female at birth and lived as men for varying periods of time.[14] Eastern Orthodoxy offered an accepted path for people to perform gender in ways other than those assigned at birth. A lifestyle of extreme faith could alter the very nature of a person, from the Byzantine perspective, and that change would be understood as an expression of faith. Projected imagery and thought constructs often seem to supersede the superficial physical reality of events in primary sources such as saints' lives, allowing individuals who are male or female at birth to claim gender roles theoretically outside of their reach without the same amount of resistance as they might have encountered in western Europe. This seems to hold true especially in a religious context. Herrin notes how there did not seem to be much significant pushback against Irene as a ruler on the basis of her gender in the east.[15] In the west, however, Irene's reign was viewed in an entirely different way. The Holy Roman Empire had its beginnings during her reign, with part of the justification being that the Roman throne was unoccupied because it could not truly be held by a woman.[16]

Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity by Kenneth Holum traces the accumulation of power by Pulcheria in the 5th century and posits that she used religious imagery related to Mary to her advantage.[17] The question of how Irene participated in

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[14] Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 89-120.

[15] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 101.

[16] Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 87.

[17] Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 170-174; 213-216; 227.

this tradition of imperial women making room for themselves within the dominant power structures of the empire is central to my thesis. I want to explore the significance of the multiple roles of Mary, how those match the role of the Byzantine emperor, and how Irene was able to embrace a specific kind of symbolic authority through her advocation of iconophile ideas. Holum provides an admirable framework for understanding these women through the cultural mores they were drawing upon and the public imagery they crafted for themselves. However, it should be noted that this exploration of cultural perspectives and pathways to power can only apply to a small portion of the population. The life of an elite Byzantine woman differed drastically from the life of a common woman. Two primary differences would be in access to education and in the idea that women should generally be separated from men to protect their modesty. The concept of separation of the genders persisted, but it is unclear how strict those procedures were in practice.[18] I hope to apply some of Holum's methods and questions to later imperial Byzantine women in order to contribute further to the history of how they consolidated power.

While modern historians make distinctions between the Catholic church and the Eastern Orthodox church as well as the Roman empire and the Eastern Roman empire, it is important to remember that those distinctions were often irrelevant in the public consciousness at the time.

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[18] Ecaterina Lung, "Depictions of Women in the Works of Early Historians and Chroniclers: Between Stereotype and Reality," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 43, no. 1, Special Issue: Women, Gender, and Law: Essays from the Gender and Medieval Studies Conference at Mid-America Medieval Association in Honor of the Late Shona Kelly Wray (Spring 2017): 8.

Byzantium was Rome[19] and while the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches had been growing apart for a long time, they would not officially claim their mutual independence until the Schism of 1054. Clearly, something happened in Byzantine culture around the turn of the 9th century which allowed Irene to reign and possess some religious authority in addition to her secular authority.[20] Eastern orthodoxy allowed her to fulfill the role of intercessor between people of all genders and God to an extent unseen in the west. The question becomes, where did these differences in reception come from? Byzantium was by no means an egalitarian society and that is not what I am suggesting, but rather that scholars examine the permutations in religion and literature that allowed for such fluidity.

Primary Sources

An intriguing mix of primary sources exists for this period in Byzantine history. The primary source on which a large part of this study is *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*. The *Chronicle,* written as a history, is stunningly contemporary to Irene's life. It is estimated that Theophanes recorded his account of her reign — which ended in 805 CE - by 814 CE.[21] As a staunch iconophile, Theophanes opposed the surge of iconoclasm in the years following Irene's

[19] It was later deemed "the Second Rome" by some. See Filofei, "Moscow the Third Rome," https://pages.uoregon.edu/sshoemak/325/texts/moscow_the_third_rome.htm.

[20] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses,* 17-18.

[21] Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), x1vii.

death and ended up imprisoned for his beliefs before he died.[22] Herrin notes that "while [Theophanes] has difficulty accounting for many events of the 770s, he accepts her exercise of power and praises her reversal of iconoclasm."[23]

Theophanes possessed a religious agenda that obviously impacted his writing. As an iconophile monk, he would later be venerated as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox church. The majority of the sources that mention Irene are heavily religious in nature, so understanding the role of women in the theology of the time is essential because the role of women in Eastern Orthodoxy impacts how she is portrayed in sources. The general perception of Irene and how her legacy was shaped after her death can be gleaned from Theophanes' text, but it is more difficult to evaluate accurately how Irene may have purposefully shaped her image. Very few of Irene's writings or speeches are available, although it can be assumed that she did send letters. There are also some legal documents from her reign, although they are not available in English translation. One of the few sources in which Irene speaks directly is a Latin translation of a letter to the pope inviting him to send representatives to the Second Council of Nicaea in 787.[24] The Greek original is not extant.[25] Irene's words are also quoted in the Chronicle and in her *vita*. Scholars rely on these writings and other evidence to provide clues as to what factors came together to allow her to rule as a woman. Keeping in mind the tradition of imperial women

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[22] Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), x1ix.

[23] Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence,* 194.

[24] Karl Joseph von Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church: From the Original Documents Volume 5* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1896), 346-353.

[25] Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church,* 346.

shaping their public image through religious imagery, it would be misguided to overlook Irene's agency and how it may have influenced writings about her.

Given Theophanes' status as an iconophile saint and the prominent role of Irene in restoring an iconophile perspective as orthodoxy, his motivation to portray her in a positive light seems clear. Even so, he does still discuss some of her actions which he considered wrong and makes excuses for her that play strongly into Byzantine gender stereotypes. The most egregious of these actions was Irene's blinding of her son Constantine. This is mentioned in both Theophanes' *Chronicle* and in a *vita* of Irene. It may be that knowledge of the event was so widespread that the authors could not simply ignore it, even if they wanted to do so.[26] This inclusion does provide evidence that the blinding actually occurred since it is an event that the author has to work into his narrative structure. Irene's violent political actions, which were clearly incompatible with the life of a typical saint, provide insight into imperial sainthood and the relationship between rulership and Eastern Orthodoxy in the empire.

While not necessarily an entirely accurate source, most Byzantinists who study the 8th century use Theophanes' *Chronicle* as a foundational record and work from it assuming that the events it recaps are factual unless contradicted by other evidence. This is an ongoing issue for ancient and medieval historians who have a limited amount of extant written sources for any given time and place. Attempting to assess the accuracy of such sources can be difficult, especially if a source seems even-handed, but is recording events a hundred years after they were said to have happened. In this light, it is notable that one of the few accounts we have written about Irene was by someone who lived during her reign. The standards of modern historians do

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[26] Warren Treadgold, "The Unpublished Saint's Life of the Empress Irene," in *Byzantinische Forschungen* 8 (1982): 238.

not map onto the practices of medieval historians of the Roman or Byzantine empires, but this genre can be generally considered somewhat more reliable than other categories of literature such as invectives or saints' lives. Even so, it is essential to properly assess the motivations of the author, potential imperial input in the project, and the political circumstances of the time when it was written. For my purposes, whether or not the events described actually took place is only of minor importance since the primary goal is to learn something more about Byzantine culture and the response of this particular author to the reign of Irene.

My primary goal in providing a close reading of the section of the *Chronicle* dealing with Irene's reign is to use it as an entry point to investigate Byzantine attitudes surrounding women, theology, and power. As an important author recounting the reign of the first sole female emperor, Theophanes' shaping of his narrative in both traditional and nontraditional ways is worthy of more attention. The first time Irene is mentioned in the *Chronicle*, it is in relation to another saint named Euphemia, who was famous for playing a role in the development of theology in at the Council of Chalcedon.[27] Irene, too, plays a significant role in the determination of Orthodoxy, with which Theophanes is particularly concerned. The author is purposeful in how he relates events and is not beyond using literary techniques and flourishes to further his agenda. Keeping that in mind, a study of the text benefits from direct literary analysis concerning potential symbolism and the engagement of his portrayal with common tropes about women in Byzantine society.

Over the years there have been several translations of the *Chronicle*. The 2002 translation by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott will be the primary version utilized, as it is the most recent, but the 1982 translation of some excerpts by Anthony Santoro and the full 1982 translation by Harry

[27] Theophanes*,* AM 6258, Mango, 607.

Turtledove are also notable. Up until now there has been little attempt to read Theophanes through a lens that takes into account the advances in the field of Byzantine gender that have taken place in the last thirty years. Herrin is one of the few scholars who has explored some excerpts from the *Chronicle* from such a perspective, noting how Irene's womanly weakness is used as an excuse that allows her to avoid complete responsibility for events that do not seem to agree with what a godly mother should be doing.[28]

The other major genre of primary sources I will be utilizing is saints' lives, which relate to the mythos surrounding Irene's reign, the political and religious happenings of the empire at the time, and the role of imperial women overall. There are no indications that Irene's cult ever became popular among commoners. While a number of imperial family members were designated as saints after their deaths, popularity was another matter entirely. Imperial sainthood turned out to be a fundamentally different matter than sainthood for other figures. It was another means of reinforcing the idea of legitimacy for the imperial family. In other words, this is an example of the imperial family curating a public image to further the political and religious agenda of the current ruler by honoring past rulers whose success and piety they upheld as signs of God's favor. Standard saints' lives include examples of the extreme piety of the figures they discuss as well as examples of miracles that are attributed to them. Helena, Pulcheria, Anthousa, and Theodora were all imperial women who were made saints after their deaths. Sainthood was a significant honor available regardless of gender.

Although Irene did have a saints' life written about her, there has been very little analysis of it in the scholarship. The only partial translation into English and analysis of it was published in 1982 by Warren Treadgold. Part of the reason for its lack of usage among scholars is that most

[28] Herrin, *Women in Purple,* 111-113.

of the text directly corresponds to the text of the *Chronicle*.[29] The section that is different, however, contains a number of interesting elements that deserve further attention.

This section centers on the convent that Irene founded on Prinkipos as well as her death and burial in a church dedicated to the *Theotokos* (Mother of God).[30] This is particularly significant because of Pulcheria's engagement in the *Theotokos* debate (some thought calling Mary the Mother of God elevated Mary inappropriately) and her use of the imagery in the 5th century as discussed by Holum.[31] The significance of motherhood in the religious typology of Eastern Orthodoxy is difficult to reconcile with Irene's treatment of her son Constantine. In his article exploring the archetype of motherhood in Byzantine sources, Peter Hatlie claims that even when women had some other extraordinary accomplishment, their role as mothers was still usually held up as their primary distinction.[32] This discordance between the previous female imperial imagery and Irene's actions brings up questions of how Irene balanced her political and religious image as well as why her mostly positive portrayal was able to triumph in the sources. Theophanes readily excoriates emperors he finds lacking. His handling of Irene is, comparatively, vastly different.

Treadgold points that out, although there is not much information about the convent on Prinkipos, it ended up hosting multiple imperial women in the following years.[33] Irene's founding of this convent was not particularly unique, as that was one technique typically used by

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[29] Treadgold, "The Unpublished Saint's Life," 238.

[30] Treadgold, "The Unpublished Saint's Life," 247; 250.

[31] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 154;147-174.

[32]Hatlie, "Images of Motherhood and Self," 43-44.

[33] Treadgold, "The Unpublished Saint's Life," 250.

imperial figures to demonstrate power. Elif Demirtiken further discusses the patterns of such patronage in "Imperial Women and Religious Foundations in Constantinople," stating that "Acquiring prestige through patronage of monumental construction was particularly important for elite women in Byzantium as they had no official roles in state and society: they needed alternative stages for self-representation."[34] It is unusual that Irene was removed from the convent after her banishment there by Nikephoros and then exiled to Lesbos.[35]

The life of the 9th century empress Theodora is another useful point of comparison since she ruled as regent for her son during the second restoration of icons. Theodora fit more easily into the mold for female saints than Irene, but Irene's influence can be seen in the continuation of iconophile theology among women of the imperial family. Nichola Constas and Martha P. Vinson respectively provide translations of the *Life of Saint Theodora* and the *Life of Saint Anthousa* (another imperial family member) in *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints' Lives in English Translation*.

An intriguing shift in the activity of imperial female voices at the time shows up in various writings after the time of Irene. It is casually mentioned, for example, in the brief *Life of*

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[34] Elif Demirtiken, "Imperial Women and Religious Foundations in Constantinople," in *Piroska and the Pantokrator: Dynastic Memory, Healing and Salvation in Komnenian Constantinople*, ed. Marianne Sághy and Robert Ousterhout (New York: Central European University Press, 2019), 175.

[35] Treadgold, "The Unpublished Saint's Life," 248.

Saint Anthousa that Irene asked Anthousa to rule with her but Anthousa refused.[36] Anthousa was the daughter of the staunchly iconoclast Constantine V. Irene and Constantine VI blinded her brother Nikephoros and cut out the tongues of three of her other brothers. Anthousa was aligned with the iconophile creed. This example of her humility would not have appeared prior to Irene's reign because there was no precedent for women ruling alone. Her actual opinion on Irene might have been affected by the torture done to her brothers, but that is only one possibility. The continuing study of Byzantine gender offers scholars the opportunity to approach foundational sources with a critical eye and a new perspective. Herrin begins the process of examining Theophanes through this lens, but only briefly. The insight which might be available through a close reading of Irene's reign that takes into account Byzantine constructions of proper gender roles and the association of imperial women with certain religious imagery (as seen in Holum), is invaluable and the next step in this line of scholarship. Theology proved to be a central element of Irene's rise to power. By calling for the Second Council of Nicaea, which embraced the veneration of icons in 787 CE, Irene exercised religious authority while also forging a crucial association between herself and the purpose of the icon as a tool of intercession between humans and heaven. The primary purpose of my thesis is to trace the connections between previous pathways to female power in order to investigate what unique circumstances came together to make it allowable for Irene to rule on her own as emperor. Subsequently, tracing differences in female power and in the prominence of female voices after her reign will provide a broad picture of adaptability, intelligence, and religious power among imperial Byzantine women.

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[36] "The Life of Saint Anthousa, Daughter of Constantine V," in *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints' Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot and trans. Nicholas Constas, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), 23.

Chapter II. A Human Icon: Irene, Icons, & Imperial Intercession

By the end of Irene of Athens' reign, women and icons had become deeply connected in the public imagination. Iconophile literature holds a special space for women who fulfill the role of the defender of icons.[37] This might be in part the result of icons being tied to domestic spaces. Herrin argues that women were more likely to venerate icons because their outlets to worship were more limited than those of their male counterparts. Icons could be used in the private spaces that women were more likely to occupy and provided them with an intimate channel of worship when, according to Eastern Orthodox theology, they were not allowed inside the church sanctuary.[38] Women were more limited in the ways they could worship since they were sectioned off from men during the actual services.[39] Given this, Herrin suggests that it is possible that women relied more heavily on the veneration of icons than other methods of worship.[40] She also holds that household icon veneration was a loose descendant of the worship of household gods.[41] While the Eastern Orthodox church may have limited the particular ways in which women worshipped, it is also true that a tradition of female religious leadership persisted in the Eastern Orthodox church. Women in the east could be deaconesses long after that practice had

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[37] Robin Cormack, "Women and Icons, and Women in Icons," in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (New York: Routledge, 1997), 35-39.

[38] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 6. Byzantine churches consisted of several spaces, with one of the holiest being the sanctuary where the altar was housed and sacraments were administered.

[39] Robert F. Taft, "Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When-And Why?" *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998): 1.

[40] Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, 61-62.

[41] Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, 39-40.

fallen out of favor with the church in the west.[42] This kind of leadership in the church is significant.

Herrin's argument must be examined on several fronts to determine its validity. Robin Cormack argues that Herrin is mistaken and that both men and women venerated icons in the home.[43] At this point, the question becomes two-pronged. How confined were women to domestic spaces in reality and what channels of worship were available to them?

Byzantine culture embraced the idea of maintaining standards of modesty by keeping men and women physically separated. Women were supposed to have dedicated spaces within the home to help them avoid the presence of men and there were specific rules about being chaperoned in public if they did have a need to leave the home.[44] It is unsurprising that the ideal of the *gynaikonitis* (the "women's quarters") — an ancient Greek system for keeping women separate from men in the home and in public — persisted. As the Greek-speaking continuation of the Roman empire, the Byzantines adopted cultural and political aspects from both east and west. While the separation of men and women does show up in Byzantine literature, it is unclear how firm those boundaries truly were.[45] Imperial women, at least, did live in women's quarters regulated by eunuchs.[46] Ecaterina Lung indicates that while the idea of the *gynaikonitis* was lauded in theory, there also were not social penalties for women who transgressed that set of

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[42] Valerie A. Karras, "Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church," *Church History* 73, no. 2 (June 2004): 273-276.

[43] Cormack, "Women and Icons," 34.

[44] Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, 17-18.

[45] Lung, "Depictions of Women in the Works of Early Byzantine Historians," 8.

[46] Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, 220-225.

customs.[47] By the time of Irene's reign in the 8th century, the Byzantine *gynaikonitis* was perhaps more a social construct of appropriate behavior than a strongly enforced system of gendered separation.

Even so, women of the highest status are sometimes shown in literature directly interacting with men without a second thought.[48] One example of this is when Irene talks with Patriarch Paul.[49] Other times in Irene's story, however, the reader can infer that she participated in some important matters through male proxies, such as when Staurakios speaks with some leading members of the army.[50] Whether this is a matter of convenience, a matter of propriety, or a matter of personal relationship is difficult to determine. As an emperor, Irene is an outlier in terms of Byzantine women. Perhaps gender norms operated differently than that of most Byzantine women because of the way her predecessors had set up the role of the empress. Nevertheless, her actions are an example of the potential flexibility of Byzantine social rules in regard to gender.

Even though most women might not have been confined to domestic spaces in reality, they still were deeply associated with those spaces and likely spent much time within the walls of their homes. While icons were utilized everywhere, from churches to battlefields to homes, a focus on women using icons to worship in their homes emerged in iconophile literature.[51] This

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[47] Lung, "Depictions of Women in the Works of Early Byzantine Historians," 1, 8.

[48] Lung, "Depictions of Women in the Works of Early Byzantine Historians and Chroniclers: Between Stereotype and Reality," 8.

[49] Theophanes, AM 6276, Mango, 631.

[50] Theophanes, AM 6279, Mango, 635.

[51] Cormack, "Women and Icons," 35-39.

association emphasized the intimacy and purity of engaging in icon veneration by linking the act to women and by extension to domesticity.

Whether or not women actually engaged in icon veneration more often than men, they did become strongly linked with the iconophile movement in the public imagination. Iconophile writers found that the theology behind the veneration of icons was easily highlighted through the associations that came with womanhood in the Byzantine world. The *Life of Stephen the Younger* tells the story of women protesting at the Chalke Gate when an icon of Christ was taken down from its public display by the emperor.[52] Icons represented a conduit to the divine. In the words of John of Damascus (7th-8th century CE), "For as we said, the honour that is given to the best of fellow-servants is a proof of good-will towards our common Lady, and the honour rendered to the image passes over to the prototype."[53] They were indicative of a personal experience with God through the proxy of physical material and the powers of the saint portrayed.

Given how significant icons — and images in general — were to Irene's reign, it is somewhat surprising that few images survive that explicitly depict the empress. While we are aware of the churches she built, an image of Irene herself remains elusive, with the important exception of coins crafted during her reign. One such coin minted while she ruled alone centers her image as the only figure on both sides.[54] Additionally, the writing on the coin uses the female

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[52] Cormack, "Women and Icons," 37-39.

[53] John of Damascus, "In Defense of Icons," (c. 730 CE), trans. Paul Halsall. *The Internet Medieval Source Book*, (Fordham University, 1996), https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/johndam-icons.asp.

[54] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 100. ; Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 87-88.

form of the imperial title, *basilissa*. She did not choose to give herself the male title of emperor (*basileus*) on these coins, even though she did do so on some legal documents, which makes it arguable that by doing so she was expanding the definition of empress.[55] Outside of coins though, no images of Irene have survived.

In contrast, depictions of the iconophile empress Theodora do survive, such as the *Triumph of Orthodoxy*, which was created in the 15th century.[56] This might be part of the general trend that sees Irene replaced as a primary iconophile saint by Theodora, likely because the latter was much more palatable as a saint. In contrast with *the Life of Irene*, the *Life of Theodora* takes a notably more traditional approach to the second iconophile empress, who barely has a voice in the narrative.[57] It is not entirely clear if Theodora interacts directly with men, but she is a more demure presence. This was possibly a response to Irene's transgression of gender norms.[58]

The fact that Irene and Theodora — two women — each brought an end to a period of iconoclasm by calling an ecumenical council is surely not a coincidence. Even if Irene was initially taking advantage of the rhetoric involving women and icons as a means to gain the support of a segment of the church, she still became an example of a real woman identifying

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[55] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 100.

[56] Cormack, "Women and Icons," 25-31.

[57] *The Life of St. Theodora,* in *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints' Lives in English Translation* Dumbarton Oaks, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot, trans. and intro Martha Vinson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 354.

[58] Much thanks to Mary Grace DuPree for having a conversation with me on the subject of Irene's legacy and for suggesting the idea that Theodora's *vita* was a response to discomfort over Irene's transgression of gender roles.

strongly with iconophile beliefs for her own purposes. Representing that position strengthened Irene's authority by further associating her with Mary. Mary was an essential figure in Eastern Orthodoxy as a whole, but her role as a defender and an intercessor held special resonance in the iconophile movement.[59] The roles of defender and intercessor were, interestingly enough, also roles of the ruling emperor. Some of the icons which purportedly possessed the most power or performed the most miracles were linked to the Mother of God.

Irene's decision to build upon the cultural association between women and icons is an interesting choice. At first glance, it is clear she was distancing herself from her husband so she and her son could begin their rule without having to deal with lingering hostilities from the Church because of Leo's actions. Irene expels and replaces factions of soldiers that Theophanes claims were iconoclast when they challenge her because of the ecumenical council.[60] Irene saw more to be gained in enlisting the support of the church and the religious imagery of Mary, even if it did anger some actors in the army. The question of how much she was trying to appeal to the masses requires determining how strong iconoclastic and iconophile factions were at the time, which is difficult. It is possible she was trying to appeal to common women, if there was truly a dedication to icons among them, but that seems unlikely since most women did not have political influence like Irene. A few generations later, however, an uprising occurred where the rebels looked to both of the 11th century empresses Zoë Porphyrogenita (r. 1028 - 1050 CE) and Theodora Porphyrogenita (r. 1042 - 1050 CE) for leadership, which eventually resulted in them

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[59] Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, 57. See also Cormack, "Women and Icons," 32.

[60] Theophanes, AM 6278-6280, Mango, 635-637. For more on this incident, see Chapter III ("Empress Irene in *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*")

ruling jointly.[61] The writers communicating these events may have exaggerated this portrayal of unanimous agreement and popular power to serve their own agendas. When such texts mention the people, it can be difficult to parse out whether they are discussing the opinions of a broader swath of the population or still primarily the influential voices of the elite.

The component of genuine belief was likely another element motivating Irene, along with her political agenda. Irene might have truly been a strong iconophile. As a young bride in the imperial household, Irene might have found power and comfort in embracing the tradition of previous empresses strongly identifying themselves with Mary, icons, and Eastern Orthodoxy as a whole. Away from most of her family as a teenager, Irene was forced to forge her own identity in a foreign environment. As always, though, Irene operated on her own terms and her own understanding of piety and iconophile beliefs. It seems that she felt free to transgress religious norms when she thought it was necessary to maintain her power. Her blinding of Constantine VI demonstrates that. It is possible that she felt morally justified in those kinds of actions because she understood them as expressions of her fulfillment of her ultimate role as a defender like the Virgin Mary. If that is the case, then that aspect of the imperial Marian tradition was able to make the rare move of being prioritized above the performance of Byzantine motherhood, which was a different defining aspect of Mary. The multitude of the roles fulfilled by Mary gave Imperial Byzantine women a wide range of options for appropriate action with a symbolic precedent that was not as accessible to women in the lower classes in the same way. Herrin traces a thread of resiliency in the way that imperial women in the decades immediately following Irene's reign maintained their iconophile beliefs even through another iconoclastic

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[61] Michael Psellus, *Chronographia*, trans. E.R.A Sewter, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 94-109.

period.[62] This again illustrates how the connection between women and icons did eventually come to have some basis in reality.

Imperial women also had more incentive to maintain the support of the church over the army because their ultimate safety and comfort oftentimes depended on making connections within the church and spaces for themselves. Surely, most imperial women were aware of the fate of exile that might befall them if they fell out of favor. It was relatively common for imperial women to be banished and forced to take orders, living out the rest of their lives in convents. While these women could not usually control this trajectory, they could sometimes exert influence over the details. The reasons why imperial women publicly funded churches and monasteries extended beyond the need to bolster their power by associating themselves with religious figures such as Mary. Founding such sites often allowed them to stay in the good graces of the church and possibly determine the place of their exile. Irene is a case in point, as she was initially exiled to a convent she founded.[63]

Elif Demirtiken notes that church building projects undertaken by imperial women from the 8th century onward possessed different characteristics than those built by their male counterparts.[64] Part of the reason for this difference may have been that it was a survival strategy for imperial women who knew how their stories might end.[65] It should also be noted that the church often publicly disagreed with emperors who divorced their wives and made them retire to

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[62] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 178-180

[63] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 657.

[64] Demirtiken, "Imperial Women and Religious Foundations in Constantinople," 177-178.

[65] Demirtiken, “Imperial Women and Religious Foundations in Constantinople,” 180-182, 190-191.

monastic life. One example of this is the exile of Maria of Amnia, the wife of Irene's son Constantine VI, and her divorce from the emperor. The church was hesitant to support his next marriage to a woman named Theodote because, as Theophanes notes, it was considered illegal.[66] This was primarily because he had no substantial reasons to divorce Maria in the first place and he married Theodote within the year, both facts that in conjunction made some people deeply uncomfortable with the morality of those actions.[67] Theophanes suggests that Irene was trying to sow discord by plotting to drive a wedge between Theophanes and Maria of Amnia and bring shame on her son so she could gain power.[68]

Undoubtedly, there were multiple motivations behind such disagreements between the church and the emperor. While those disagreements cannot be read as direct support for imperial women from the church since they usually are more concerned with questionable actions of the male emperor, they are still notable. When paired with the history of imperial women funding the church, they signal an alliance that was potentially closer than the relationship between imperial men and the church. Irene may have decided that she had a better chance of survival if she allied herself with several strong actors in the church than if she allied herself with the iconoclast factions.

Byzantine women of the 8th century were also fundamental to the shaping of Eastern Orthodox theology. Irene and Theodora are the two most obvious examples of this dynamic, but another aristocratic woman was also well-known and respected for her contributions to

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[66] Theophanes, AM 6287, Mango, 645.

[67] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 96-98.

[68] Theophanes, AM 6287, Mango, 645.

theological discourse through her hymns.[69] Kassia the Nun wrote in the decades following Irene's reign in the 9th century. One story places her in close proximity to the royal family when she appears as a candidate in the royal bride show hosted to find an appropriate wife for Theophilos (r. 829 – 842 CE). Her role as a participant in the bride show speaks to Kassia's many positive qualities, but in an intriguing turn of events she is not chosen to be an imperial wife after Theophilos makes a snide comment about women and Eve and she makes a wise reply concerning Mary as the redemption of women.[70] Theophilos was the ill-fated husband of the 9th century empress Theodora, who would go on to bring an end to the second period of iconoclasm after her iconoclast husband was dead. As one of the few surviving Byzantine female voices, Kassia, was in close proximity to the epicenter of iconophile action and the imperial family, even though she has no direct imperial ties herself. Kassia was an iconophile herself, which is another demonstration of the links between female agency, the imperial family, and the veneration of icons.[71]

The iconophile defense of icons was a particularly useful theological movement for Irene to embrace perhaps because of an existing association with women, but also because of the centrality of a female intercessor championed in the figure of Mary. The Virgin Mary's primary roles as an intercessor and defender matched with the primary facets of Irene's role as emperor. Theophanes believed that icons provided defense and protection and, in turn, desperately needed

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[69] Anna M. Silvas. "Kassia the Melodist (ca. 810–ca. 865) and Her Use of the Scriptures," in *The Early Middle Ages*, ed. by Franca Ela Consolino and Judith Herrin, (Atlanta, GA: The Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2020) 51–53.

[70] Silvas. "Kassia the Melodist," 54–57.

[71] Silvas. "Kassia the Melodist," 52-53.

defense and protection in society at large. Mary's motherly protectiveness extends beyond domestic elements and into military feats as well, for instance, when Theophanes' *Chronicle* notes that "reliquaries and icons of the mother of God"[72] were on the ships that accompanied Herakleios' army before he overthrew Phokas and became emperor himself.[73] The centrality of the Virgin and her relics to this conflict and the protection of Constantinople is noted by Cameron.[74] It was a common practice for icons to be carried around publicly when a city was under military threat. In another article, Cameron suggests that "the cult of Mary above all represented a way in which the city itself [Constantinople] might feel protected and specially singled out in the most efficacious way possible for direct access to God's mercy."[75] The strength of this theology of military protection tied to icons and the doctrine of *Theotokos* created an environment more receptive to women wielding more authority than they previously had. Irene also wields military authority, as can be seen in her involvement in both skirmishes and diplomatic efforts with the Abbasid Empire and her directing of an imperial conquest effort.[76] Whether Theophanes portrays these instances in a positive light or not is a more complicated question.

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[72] Theophanes, AM 6102, Mango, 427.

[73] Theophanes, AM 6102, Mango, 427-428.

[74] Averil Cameron, "The Virgin's Robe: An Episode in The History Of Early Seventh-Century Constantinople," *Byzantion* 49 (1979): 42–56.

[75] Averil Cameron, "The Theotokos in Sixth-Century Constantinople: A City Finds Its Symbol." *The Journal of Theological Studies* 29, no. 1 (1978): 101.

[76] Theophanes, AM 6273 - AM 6276; AM6282, Mango, 626-631; 639.

The Virgin Mary was also a significant figure in the church in western Europe, as evidenced by her constant invocation in western religious literature and art. Icons were used in the west and *Theotokos* was affirmed there as well, but the debate over icons was not nearly as violent or central. Even so, a tradition of pious, saintly queens existed in the west in the Middle Ages.[77] The Byzantine world was facing a crisis of uncertainty about theologies of imagery brought to the forefront by Islamic ideas suggesting that the use of images in worship constituted idolatry.[78] Iconoclast opposition led iconophile believers to rally around icons and the figure embodying the purpose of icons – the Virgin Mary – particularly forcefully.

The physicality of worship through icons played into imperial ideology in several ways. Firstly, the courts of Byzantine emperors were saturated with ceremony and ritual. Crowning an emperor or empress required an intricate procedure outlined in the *De Ceremoniis,* a book of Byzantine court rituals that was compiled sometime in the 10th century.[79] The symbolism of public movement was highly intentional. It is not surprising that imperial women would use symbolism so present in the court to establish their power through public rituals, such as translations of relics, that would link them symbolically with Mary in the mind of the public.[80]

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[77] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 36-38.

[78] Anna Chrysostomides, "John of Damascus's Theology of Icons in the Context of Eighth-Century Palestinian Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 75 (2021): 294.

[79] Michael McCormick, "*De Ceremoniis*," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford University Press, 1991.) https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195046526.001.0001/acref-9780195046526-e-1386.

[80] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 108-109, 170-174, 213-216, and 227.

The court was supposed to parallel the heavenly kingdom in both its glory and the authority structures set up within it. The emperor was supposed to serve as a conduit for divine will. While the emperor certainly was not regarded as God, as that would be a flagrant heresy, the symbolism of the imperial ritual was meant to suggest that the emperor was God's counterpart on earth.[81] The emperor — much like the role a physical icon played — served as an intercessor. The Mother of God was the ultimate intercessor. The long history of imperial women since Pulcheria in the 5th century identifying themselves with Mary and her characteristics meant that it was already seen as natural and appropriate for imperial women to serve in that role.[82] Since intercessor was also a role also held by the emperors, perhaps that history made it easier for Irene to step into the role of emperor without too much objection on account of her gender.

Imperial women harnessed the power of archetypes and piety through ritualistic public religious displays. The public movement of relics to churches (called translations) was one medium through which empresses could display their piety. Pulcheria is famous for her involvement in the translation of the relics of St. Stephen.[83] Irene's translation of the relics of St. Euphemia falls in line with the tradition of imperial women utilizing public translation in this manner. In addition to granting an empress an association with sainthood, translations along with other public efforts were meant to endear her to the people, which seems to have worked in the

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[81] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 66 and Antony Eastmond, "The Heavenly Court, Courtly Ceremony, and the Great Byzantine Ivory Triptychs of the Tenth Century," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 69 (2015): 71-93.

[82] See Chapter III - "An Inconvenient Saint" for more about imperial women and the Virgin.

[83] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 103-109.

case of Pulcheria.[84] Earenfight notes that in Western Europe, empresses were often seen as serving as an intercessor between the people and the king.[85] Although that idea was not necessarily enacted in the same way in Byzantium, it is possible that imperial women were tapping into multiple registers of intercession. Patronage of churches and monasteries were also essential expressions of imperial female piety. Irene was involved in at least five religious building projects over the course of her life.[86]

The ritualization of glory and God's kingdom had other consequences as well. Being in the presence of the emperor required a ceremonial prostration called *proskynesis*, which entailed a variety of types of prostration. In one of the most serious kinds of *proskynesis,* people would fully prostrate themselves on the floor before the emperor. A similar type of prostration representing reverence in a sacred context was known as *metanoia*.[87] Practices such as *proskynesis* that employed structured, ritualized reverence to the emperor contributed to an idea of the court as an ordered reflection of heaven and, by extension, a place of intercession between heaven and earth.

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[84] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 226-227.

[85] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 11-12.

[86] Demirtiken, "Imperial Women and Religious Foundations in Constantinople," 178-179.

[87] Michael McCormick, "Proskynesis," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford University Press, 1991.) https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195046526.001.0001/acref-9780195046526-e-4524.

The presence of eunuchs in the court is another contributing factor to the construction of gender through ritual in the Byzantine court.[88] The fundamental role eunuchs played in facilitating court ceremony was supposed to mirror the heavenly court on earth with eunuchs serving as earthly counterparts for the non-gendered angels of the heavenly realm. Imperial women interacted with the eunuchs in the imperial household frequently, as facilitating the safety and movement of imperial women was one of the primary duties of imperial eunuchs.[89] The presence of eunuchs — a group of people who did not fit neatly into binary gender roles — performing such a central role in such an essential physical space is no doubt significant. There is the possibility that it encouraged an additional degree of flexibility about gender roles in the imperial Byzantine mind.

Physical ritual was both a reflection of imperial Byzantine thought as well as an influence on it. It is doubtful that Irene and the imperial women before her would have been able to establish their claims to authority without this intense focus on court ritual along with religious ritual. Icon use was also deeply tied to ritual. It served as a way to connect with God through the material world in much the same way that the Byzantine court was supposed to reveal a hint of the heavenly kingdom on Earth.

While the imperial cult that existed in Rome prior to the fall of the Western Roman empire in 476 CE differed from the imperial sainthood of the Christian Eastern Roman empire, significant traces of it remained. In both cases, emperors and empresses could be exalted to a

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[88] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 17-21

[89] Shaun F. Tougher, "Byzantine Eunuchs: An Overview, With Special Reference to their Creation and Origin," in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (New York: Routledge, 1997), 170.

new degree of worship through deification or sainthood. In imperial Rome, offerings could be made to the imperial cult as a way to support Rome and try to curry the favor of the gods. The imperial cult and sainthood both served as ways to signify the divine favor experienced by the ruling family.

Syncretism persisted through the Christianization of the Roman empire. Constantine I himself utilized the imagery of Sol Invictus on coins long after he had embraced Christianity.[90] The use of religious imagery to associate himself with the characteristics of his former god demonstrates a precedent for the ways that women such as Pulcheria and Irene would cast themselves in the role of Mary. Just like any good emperor, Irene embraced the role of the intercessor between the earthly and the heavenly realms. She served as the embodiment of God's will on earth and got cast as a saint for her efforts. Conveniently, there was already a model for female intercession in the figure of the Virgin Mary, who was intimately linked with the use of powerful icons to defend the empire. Those icons and the saints they portrayed also happened to be symbols of intercession manifested in a physical way. Byzantine empresses used the archetype of Mary as intercessor, along with the ritual reinforcement of the parallels set up between heaven and the Byzantine court, to expand the ways they could exercise power.[91] The linkage between women and icon veneration in the public consciousness was used by Irene to strategically strengthen her connection to the church and her authority over her empire. Irene's unique ability to rule as a woman without too much objection to her on that basis was rooted in a

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[90] Noel Lenski, "Constantine Develops," in *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics* (Philadelphia; University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 27-47.

[91] Neville, *Byzantine Gender*, 90-92.

unique combination of imperial court traditions, Greco-Roman custom, and Eastern Orthodox religious practices.

Chapter III: Empress Irene in the *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*

The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor offers an account of the reigns of several emperors, including Irene of Athens. Written by 815 CE, it is mired in the iconoclastic controversies of the day and captures an attempt at reckoning with the rule of the first female emperor within two decades of her fall. Not surprisingly, Theophanes was a religious man who was heavily involved in advocating for the veneration of icons. He would later be declared a saint himself.[92] Given this, Theophanes' account is full of religious symbolism and tropes. While he was attempting to write a history and not a saint's life of Irene, elements of both appear in the text. Irene's role as a prominent iconophile and his need to write a history that captures the important events of her reign come into conflict. Theophanes cannot avoid discussing the more violent events of Irene's reign because he was writing so soon after they occurred and people were aware of what had taken place.[93] Examining the roles of gender, violence, and the significance of motherhood in the text as Theophanes negotiates these conflicting motivations presents an opportunity to better understand the cultural response to Irene.

Irene and Euphemia

The first mention of Irene in the *Chronicle* appears in the section concerning the reign of Constantine V (741 - 775 CE), who was the father of Leo IV (775 - 780CE) and the grandfather of Irene's son Constantine VI. Theophanes presents a harsh picture of Constantine V as an "unholy emperor,"[94] primarily because of his iconoclast position. In a further attempt to

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[92] Mango*, The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor,* xliv.

[93] Treadgold, "The Unpublished Saint's Life of the Empress Irene," 238.

[94] Theophanes*,* AM 6258, Mango, 607.

villainize him, the author describes how Constantine tries to dispose of a relic of St Euphemia because "he could not suffer to behold her exuding myrrh in front of all the people and refuting his inanities directed against the intercession of the saints."[95] Theophanes is invested in setting up a mythology for iconophiles that mimics tales of early Christian persecution, which requires a foolish imperial figure working against God. The focus on relics and the intercession of saints is a recurrent theme in his narrative. In Theophanes' recounting of the miracle of St Euphemia's relic, he proceeds to say:

> God…preserved it intact and manifested it once again on the island of Lemnos. By means of a nocturnal vision, He ordered it to be picked up where it lay and guarded. Under the pious Constantine and Irene…it returned with due honour to her [St Euphemia's] church which he [Constantine V], like the enemy of churches he was, had profaned by turning it into an arms-store and a dungheap, while they cleansed it and reconsecrated it so as to refute his godlessness and manifest their own godly piety. Twenty-two years after the criminal's death I myself saw this wonderful and memorable miracle in the company of the most pious emperors...[96]

This is the first appearance of Irene's name in the *Chronicle*, which shows up when Theophanes is discussing the reign of Constantine V. The author specifically states that he is bringing up later events in order to show the pious nature of Irene and Constantine VI while also demonstrating the "godlessness" of Constantine V. [97] Theophanes is clear from the outset that Irene is a ruler along with Constantine and that they are both favored by God. He credits Irene and Constantine VI relatively equally in returning St Euphemia's relic to her church in

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[95] Theophanes, AM 6258, Mango, 607.

[96] Theophanes, AM 6258, Mango, 607.

[97] Theophanes, AM 6258, Mango, 607.

Constantinople,[98] although Constantine VI's name does come first in this instance. The recovery of this holy relic after its supposed destruction by Constantine V mimics the affirmation of iconophile practices by the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE after an intense period of iconoclasm. Theophanes' message becomes clear. Orthodoxy — and iconophile theology as part of orthodoxy — will always emerge victorious. In order to legitimize the iconophile orthodoxy confirmed at the Second Council of Nicaea in his text, Theophanes needed to legitimize both of the rulers who presided over that ecumenical council. The difficulty was he had to find a way to do so despite the violence that later happened when Irene had Constantine VI killed. As a champion of the veneration of icons writing during a period of emerging iconoclasm, Theophanes' had a vested interest in both demonstrating that the conclusions of the Second Council of Nicaea were sanctioned by God and that iconophile beliefs would eventually be victorious even if challenged for a time.

As Theophanes is crafting a history or mythology for iconophile struggles, he centers his attention on the acts of persecution carried out by Constantine V, who shows a disturbing predisposition towards extreme acts of violence and humiliation. From making monks parade around the city holding hands with women[99] to having relics destroyed,[100] Theophanes makes it apparent that Constantine harbors a deep hatred of not just icons, but also well-established orthodox traditions such as monastic life and asceticism. At one point Constantine V applauds Michael Lachanodrakon for killing and terrorizing monks by saying "I have found in you a man

[98] See footnote 5 in Mango, 608.

[99] Theophanes, AM 6257, Mango, 605.

[100] Theophanes, AM 6258, Mango, 607.

after my own heart who carries out all my wishes."[101] This animosity toward religious communities by the emperor is an intriguing balance to the patronage of these establishments by imperial women. Constantine V was deeply interested in theology and he actively particpated in writing and thinking with a care that Theophanes fails to convey.[102] Theophanes explicitly compares Constantine V to "Diocletian and the ancient tyrants."[103] The truth about Constantine V's policies was more complicated than that. The unflattering portrait of Constantine V in the *Chronicle* is clearly meant to villainize the emperor. Theophanes' portrayal of Irene, conversely, is much more complex. Theophanes has difficulty figuring out how to situate her in the narrative as he cannot simply categorize her as a sinner or a saint.

This introduction linking Irene with Saint Euphemia is significant because of Euphemia's role in affirming correct theology. Although she was a saint from the early 4th century, the tale of her miracle at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE invokes her spiritual presence and power. The purpose of ecumenical councils involved the confirmation of what was and what was not orthodox. In other words, the councils were convened as an attempt to settle theological debates for good and arrive at the "correct" position that could then be adopted by Christians across the empire. The nature of the trinity and the Virgin Mary were significant issues in the centuries leading up to Irene's reign because religious figures were trying to define divinity and understand the hierarchy of holy figures to determine how much each one should be elevated. Monophysitism — a doctrine proposing that Christ only had a single divine nature rather two coexisting natures, one being divine and the other human — was the question of the day at the

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[101] Theophanes, AM 6263, Mango, 615.

[102] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 44-46.

[103] Theophanes, AM 6267, Mango, 619.

Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE.[104] Chalcedon was the site of St Euphemia's tomb and the story of the miracle states that the assembly called on her to give a sign concerning whether monophysitism was orthodox or a heresy. Church officials left two scrolls on Euphemia's body. Each scroll stated a different idea about the nature of Christ. When they returned to the tomb, the body of St Euphemia was holding the scroll which contained the correct doctrine.[105] Monophysitism was rejected in favor of the affirmation of "the orthodox doctrine of Christ's two natures, divine and human."[106]

Theophanes' choice to introduce Irene by mentioning her involvement in the translation of a relic of St Euphemia reinforces the validity of the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE, which affirmed the veneration of icons. It links Euphemia and her association with the victory of orthodoxy to Irene's views, while also potentially reminding readers of Pulcheria, another strong empress who was involved in theological matters through her participation in the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE.[107] Theophanes is attempting to

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[104] Orlando O. Espín, "Monophysitism," in *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*, ed. by Orlando O. Espín and James B. Nickoloff, (Collegeville, Minn. : Liturgical Press, 2007), 902.

[105] Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Asterius of Amasea: Ekphrasis on the Holy Martyr Euphemia," in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. Richard Valantasis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 464-465.

[106] Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity: AD 395-600* (London: Routledge, 1993), 18.

[107] Holum, Theodosian Empresses, 147-174.; Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity,* 66.

immediately establish Irene within the positive tradition of her predecessors while contrasting her actions with those of the iconoclast villain he has created in the figure of Constantine V.

The translation of the relics of Saint Euphemia was in fact a historical event that took place around 796 CE, which was the year before Irene blinded Constantine.[108] This timing was convenient for Theophanes since it gives him a chance to extol the pious nature of both Irene and Constantine VI since they were both ruling at the time. It may be that Irene was attempting to utilize the translation as a display of piety to increase her popularity and remind the public of her ties to former imperial traditions as well. During 796 CE she is explicitly noted as negotiating with various military officials for their loyalty in preparation for her sole rule.[109] Holum claims that Pulcheria used translations of relics to enhance her public image.[110] It would be no surprise for Irene to do the same thing, especially if she was attempting to shore up support in different corners for her upcoming bid for power. While Theophanes credits Constantine VI along with Irene for the return of Euphemia's relics, the *Patria* (a compilation describing sites in Constantinople[111]) only credits Irene.[112] The dating of the third book of the *Patria* where this information appears is roughly 10th century and it seems that the author is not directly drawing upon "an older main source."[113] This might indicate that the translation of the relics of Euphemia

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[108] Herrin, *Women in Purple,* 105.

[109] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 98; Theophanes, AM 6289, Mango, 648.

[110] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 108-109.

[111] *Accounts of Medieval Constantinople: The Patria*, trans. Albrecht Berger (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), ix-xv.

[112] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 105.

[113] *Accounts of Medieval Constantinople*, trans. Albrecht Berger, xiv-xv.

became more associated with Irene over time, but whatever the case it seems clear that Irene's participation in those events became tied to her legacy.

The translation of the relics of Euphemia is the first of three events in Theophanes' *Chronicle* that establish Irene as a pious woman from the outset of the account. The second involves Irene returning a crown to the Church which was taken from its rightful place by her greedy husband Leo IV. Theophanes attributes Leo's death to wearing this sacred crown when he did not possess the right to do so.[114] Not only does Irene demonstrate a sense of justice and piety by rectifying the situation, but she also enhances the crown with pearls before returning it in a public manner.[115] This incident can be read as a joint display of power and humility. According to the *Code of Justinian*, it was only proper for the imperial family to wear pearls,[116] which means that enhancement of the crown demonstrates how Irene utilized her rank to honor God. The symbolism of pearls implied by this text held weight in the highly ceremonial Byzantine court. The fact that Irene does this soon after she ascends indicates an intent to publicly communicate the legitimacy of her rule as a conduit for God's will as well as the desire to distance herself from her husband's actions and beliefs, therefore giving her a fresh slate. It

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[114] Theophanes, AM 6272, Mango, 625.

[115] Theophanes, AM 6273, Mango, 627.

[116] *The Enactments of Justinian* (Book XI, Title XI) in *Civil Law Including the Twelve Tables, the Institutes of Gaius, the Rules of Ulpian, the Opinions of Paulus, the Enactments of Justinian, and the Constitutions of Leo: Translated from the Original Latin, Edited, and Compared with All Accessible Systems of Jurisprudence Ancient and Modern*, trans. S. P. Scott in 1932 (Buffalo: William S. Hein & Co., [between 2009 and 2013]), 177-178. (The more accurate identifier for this section is Book XI, Title XII)

also sent a message to potential allies within the upper echelons of the Church that they could rely on her to act in their interests and to continue to bolster their political power if they cooperated.

The pearls may also have spiritual symbolism. St Ephrem – a Christian writer in the 4th century – mused on the various meanings of pearls in his "The Pearl, Seven Hymns on the Faith." He discussed pearls as symbols of mysteries and the things God chooses to hide and reveal.[117] Irene's emergence as a holy iconophile after the death of her iconoclast husband has a symbolic resonance with that interpretation of pearls. This theme of things hidden also echoes the story that would later circulate about her hiding icons from her husband while he was still alive.

The third incident establishing Irene's role as a pious ruler is not an act she herself undertook, and it carries more weight than the previous two examples. Theophanes states that "From that time on the pious began to speak freely. God's word spread about, those who sought salvation were able to renounce the world without hindrance, God's praises rose up to heaven, the monasteries recovered, and all good things were manifested."[118] This description of the positive results of Irene's reign and her piety is immediately followed by an unusual event. A coffin and corpse are found that bear an inscription that says, "Christ will be born of the Virgin Mary and I believe in Him. Oh sun, you will see me again in the reign of Constantine and

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[117] Saint Ephrem, "The Pearl, Seven Hymns on the Faith," trans. J.B. Morris *in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 13, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1898), Kindle location 10771-10799.

[118] Theophanes, AM 6273, Mango, 627.

Irene."[119] Although not explicitly called a miracle, this occurrence does border on one because the inscription appears to be prophetic. Mango notes that, "A token of supernatural sanction of the joint reign of Constantine and Irene would obviously have been quite helpful at this juncture…we may conclude that Irene's government went to the trouble of fabricating an inscription, in Greek and Latin, and that this inscription was later placed in St. Sophia. A pagan who had died centuries before Christ had prophesied the luminous reign of Constantine and Irene."[120]

Additionally, the fact that the discovery of the corpse follows a passage describing the prosperity of Irene's reign indicates that it may be a good omen. This positive interpretation may also be supported by Byzantine attitudes towards dead bodies, which evolved from the early Christian emphasis on the ability of the bodies of saints to maintain power even after death as potential conduits for the divine. A number of miracles in the Byzantine world were attributed to relics that were made of body parts of dead saints.[121] This incident could also be read as an

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[119] Theophanes, AM 6273, Mango, 627.

[120] Cyril Mango, "A Forged Inscription of the Year 781," *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 8/1 (1963): 205.

[121] Unlike their earlier Roman counterparts, who possessed a sense of disgust for dead bodies, corpses became a site of reverence in Byzantine culture, see John Wortley, "The Origins of Christian Veneration of Body-Parts," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 223, no. 1 (2006): 5–28. The Romans had laws concerning the necessity to bury dead bodies outside the city limits, but those attitudes started to change during late antiquity. See Wortley, "The Origins of Christian Veneration of Body-Parts," 9-10.

unsettling omen that is a harbinger of the brutal blinding of Constantine VI to come, but most indicators surrounding it seem to be positive.

While Theophanes is not writing a saint's life, he is borrowing from the tropes found in saints' lives because of his desire to confirm Irene's sainthood. A defining feature of saints' lives are usually the miracles performed because of the goodness of the saint. Given Theophanes' motivation to associate Irene with sainthood, it makes sense that most of the actual *Life of Irene* (an anonymous hagiography) is merely a close adaptation of Theophanes' account of her reign.[122] It is intriguing that Theophanes does not specifically claim this is a miracle or include elements that would elevate its importance, such as the corpse being that of a saint. The question of whether this is an actual occurrence is difficult to answer. If Irene herself staged this discovery, it seems likely that it would have been associated with a specific saint so she could translate the relics in the tradition of Helena and Pulcheria. The fact that Theophanes left out that detail may indicate that he is inventing this particular incident or that Irene herself was not heavily involved in the discovery of the coffin. Theophanes is writing close enough to these events that if he were to name a saint, he would have to name an existing church and set of relics, and it would be obvious to readers that the claim was false. Implying that the body was not that of a saint, but was still tied to a prophetic occurrence might be Theophanes' strategy for avoiding those potential issues. Even though he does not directly call it a miracle, he is still crafting a saintly aura for Irene by claiming this event happened while the empire was flourishing under her rule. Theophanes is utilizing the anecdote as a third way to establish Irene's God-given legitimacy as a ruler early in his account of her reign.

[122] Treadgold, "The Unpublished Saint's Life," 238-239.

The Mother of God and the Empire

Constantine V's attitude toward the intercession of the Virgin Mary and direct hatred of the *Theotokos* ("Mother of God") is intentionally set up to pave the way for Irene. Theophanes indicates that an attack on icons and relics is specifically an attack on Mary because both are linked with intercession between humanity and divinity. He says that, "Everywhere he rejected as being useless the intercession of the holy Virgin, the Mother of God, and of all the saints, thanks to which all manner of help wells forth for us."[123] Eventually the Virgin triumphs over Constantine V in a show of justice and vengeance. The text states that "he miserably died on board his *chelandion* [his ship] as he was crying out, 'I have been delivered to the unquenchable fire while still alive!'; and he demanded that hymns be sung to the holy Virgin, the Mother of God, whose implacable enemy he had been."[124] The scene indicates that iconophile beliefs will triumph because Mary is integrally linked with the defense of icon veneration and orthodoxy. It is also an interesting example of just vengeance being intrinsically linked with a powerful woman. The association of Irene with the *Theotokos* through the translation of the relics of Saint Euphemia and through the precedent set by former empresses offers additional weight beyond motherhood. Mary is not a passive figure. Irene's rise as a ruling empress carries a symbolic significance after the disregard of the *Theotokos* demonstrated by Constantine V.

Beyond the reign of Constantine, the intercession of the Virgin is shown at multiple points. In one story, a man throws a rock at an icon of the *Theotokos* and then destroys it, after which Mary appears to him and says "See, what a brave thing you have done to me! Verily, upon

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[123] Theophanes, AM 6258, Mango, 607.

[124] Theophanes, AM 6267, Mango, 619.

your head you have done it."[125] When the man then dies after being hit by a rock himself it is said that it is "a just reward for his impiety."[126] This scene links Mary with retribution and justice, which is one of the implications that Theophanes subtly uses to partially justify some of Irene's actions later on.

Unsurprisingly for a ruler, Irene presides over a number of violent events. As a defender and an empress, these acts are portrayed by Theophanes as normal rather than anything particularly spectacular or unnerving. Her gender does not seem to impinge on her ability to carry out the various functions of a Byzantine ruler. All of the three incidents in which she commands that individuals be "scourged"[127] occur after attempts to dethrone her. In other words, they are a standard, measured response that would likely easily fall within Theophanes' understanding of just punishment. This is especially true when compared to the excessive nature of the punishments doled out by Constantine V for offenses which Theophanes does not think should be punished at all. A lack of self-discipline with the potential to lead into excess was often considered a feminine trait in the Byzantine world, but could be overcome by women who made an effort to become more manly.[128] Irene's display of self-control in most of her imperial responses not only marks her as sometimes leaning into positive traits associated with masculinity — like numerous female saints before her — but also links her to the determination and execution of justice which Theophanes associates with the Virgin Mary. Mary is also an excellent choice for Irene to be patterned on because of the active and occasionally aggressive

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[125] Theophanes, AM 6218, Mango, 560.

[126] Theophanes, AM 6218, Mango, 560.

[127] Theophanes, AM 6273 & 6282, Mango, 627 & 639.

[128] Neville, *Byzantine Gender*, 60-64.

presence of *Theotokos* in the *Chronicle,* which clearly overrules the notion that good Byzantine women should always be passive and meek. Varying images of womanhood existed in Byzantine society and were lauded in different contexts. The extent to which it was considered appropriate for women to be aggressive was far from consistent. Eastern Orthodoxy left loopholes in the archetypes it propagated that women like Irene were able to exploit. Mary serves in a motherly protective role in addition to exacting vengeance on those who disrespect her. Tying Irene to Mary implies victories of all kinds, from military to theological.[129] Theophanes would have difficulty distancing himself from these parallels even if he wanted to, so he instead embraces them. In a world where icon worship was still in question, he could not afford for Irene — undeniably tied to Mary and the victory of iconophile orthodoxy — to be less than a saint.

The Second Council of Nicaea

The Second Council of Nicaea (787 CE) is easily the defining event of Irene's reign. It is clear in the text that Irene is more crucial to its planning and implementation than her son, which makes sense considering Constantine was a teenager at the time. Irene is situated carefully within the narrative to emphasize the importance of church officials. The events of the council begin with Paul IV, the patriarch of Constantinople from 780 to 784 CE, falling ill. In the Byzantine empire, the patriarch of Constantinople fulfilled a significant role as one of the foremost leaders of the church. This was partially because, out of the five patriarchates (seats of religious power) spread across the Christian world, the patriarch of Constantinople was geographically closest to the imperial court and the center of the empire. As a figure holding a well-respected position, the

[129] For further notes on icons and Mary as a defender see Chapter II ("A Human Icon: Irene, Icons, and Imperial Intercession").

act of Patriarch Paul IV resigning his office is a weighty occurrence. A new Patriarch needed to be chosen. In the text, Irene takes Constantine to see the ailing official and in distress she inquires why he gave up his position. He explains in an emotional manner that the separation of the eastern church from the western church is causing him grief, along with the fact that he previously condemned icons as Patriarch. He suggests an ecumenical council to resolve the issue.

There is an uneasiness about the role of the Church in the west during this period, of which there are hints throughout the *Chronicle*. Irene's relationship to the pope in Rome and to Charlemagne is touched upon, but not fully explored by Theophanes. Although the later Pope Leo III (r. 795 – 816 CE) ignored Irene's status as emperor and crowned Charlemagne as Roman emperor instead, Pope Hadrian I (r. 772 – 795 CE) seemed to accept her authority to call the synod as a regent for her son. Pope Leo's motivation in anointing Charlemagne as the Roman emperor in 800 CE stemmed from his political relationship with the Carolingian empire.[130] Charlemagne's attitude toward Irene's rise to power is unknown, but he was certainly aware of her as a prominent political force given that they had initially arranged a marriage between Charlemagne's daughter and Constantine VI before Irene later called it off.[131] Matthias Becher asserts that it was Charlemagne who called off the marriage, since it had the potential to interfere in his military efforts.[132] But according to Theophanes, she went to war with him after breaking

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[130] Matthias Becher, "Charlemagne, the Papacy, and the Byzantine Emperor," in *Charlemagne*, trans. David S. Bachrach (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 81-86.

[131] Theophanes, AM 6274 & AM 6281, Mango, 628 & 637-638.

[132] Becher, "Charlemagne," 88-89.

off the betrothal.[133] After that, she posed a threat to Charlemagne and the Pope's actions might be understood in that context.

Later, Theophanes states that Charlemagne proposed marriage to Irene when she was ruling along and that she would have accepted, had it not been for the interference of her eunuch advisor Aetios.[134] Whether Irene rejected the proposal of her own accord or not is difficult to know. A marriage alliance would have been the conventional way for a woman to assert power, but Irene seems nothing if not unconventional. Perhaps it was she who rejected the proposal, fearing Charlemagne's strength. It does seem strange that she did not marry or adopt an heir to designate a successor in the five years she ruled alone. Irene's previous plans and endeavors indicate she was thoughtful and intentional in her interactions with others in order to maintain her power. It may not be entirely fair for Theophanes to credit Aetios with the rejection of the proposal. Charlemagne's positive political interactions with Irene took place while she was still regent for her son, which was an acceptable way for women to exercise political power, then turned potentially hostile through military clashes. His coronation also served as a hostile act, but then he later tried to propose to her, showing the significant political shifts that could take place in short periods of time.

While Irene was still serving as regent for her son, her role was well-defined and accepted in both the Byzantine Empire and Rome. In the context of the Second Council of Nicaea, Theophanes states that "The Empress, too, sent word to the same pope asking him to dispatch letters and emissaries to be present at the synod."[135] Theophanes credits Irene for

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[133] Theophanes, AM 6281, Mango, 637-638.

[134] Theophanes, AM 6293 & AM 6294, Mango, 653-654.

[135] Theophanes, AM 6277, Mango, 634.

sending this missive, of which only a Latin translation survives.[136] Charles Joseph Hefele notes that Irene signed both her son's name and her own, placing his before hers, which is a practice she eventually changed.[137] As a joint ruler with Constantine VI, Pope Hadrian I finds her authority acceptable, indeed suggesting that she and her son might become a new Constantine and Helena.[138]

This becomes a repeated theme at the council and further demonstrates that from the perspective of religious figures in the west, Irene and her authority were primarily acceptable because of her motherhood. Once that role was eliminated, she could no longer hold the same authority in the eyes of some figures in the west.[139] It seems she was still able to maintain her authority in the eyes of the Church leaders in the east, perhaps because they were prioritizing her championship of icons over the importance of her motherhood. The entanglement of political and religious agendas may have aided Irene in her ability to maintain favor and support during the first few years of her reign.

In Theophanes, Irene's role in this is akin to that of other Byzantine rulers. She is a conduit for the will of the divine and it is her job to ensure that God's desires are carried out. In his narrative, her role is not to initiate religious action, but to listen to the advice of the church as to what is true orthodoxy and move from there. In reality, the situation was less clear and it is debatable whether Irene or the church initiated the idea of calling for an ecumenical council.[140]

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[136] Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church,* 348

[137] Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church,* 347.

[138] Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church,* 350.

[139] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 121.

[140] Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church,* 343.

Whatever the case, it is clear that Patriarch Paul feels free to speak in favor of the use of icons to heal, although he had denounced them during the rule of her predecessors. This indicates that the Patriarch was aware of her iconophile stance and it is possible that a wider circle of prominent people were aware of it as well.

A remarkably similar incident occurs soon after, reinforcing the idea of Irene as a facilitator rather than instigator of God's will. After Patriarch Paul dies, the empress assembles a group of people and asks who should be named patriarch. When the group responds that Tarasios should be, she says, "We, too, cast our vote for him, but he is being disobedient. Let him explain why he is not accepting the decision of our Majesty and of all the people."[141] Irene takes on an authoritative tone that Theophanes implies is appropriate. Tarasios proceeds to give what is essentially an expanded version of the speech given by Patriarch Paul only paragraphs earlier. Tarasios states, "And if our emperors, the protectors of orthodoxy, deign to approve of my request, I, too, give my consent to fulfil their command and I accept your election; but if not, I find it impossible to do so, lest I be subjected to anathema and appear condemned on the day of our Lord…"[142] Theophanes' repetition of this rejection of the seat of religious power by two holy figures indicates that the empire is out of alignment with God's will and that they, as righteous people, cannot take part in the religious and state establishment again until the error is corrected. Irene, as Theophanes implies, must be the one to correct this error in partnership with the church. Part of the way she does this is by listening to and heeding the words of other righteous figures. Constantine VI is invoked under the title as emperor, but Irene is the one who is holding conversations with both of these figures. After this it is decided that an ecumenical

[141] Theophanes, AM 6277, Mango, 632.

[142] Theophanes, AM 6277, Mango, 633

council will be held to (it is hoped) reunite a divided church under the banner of iconophile orthodoxy.

It is also notable that Theophanes quotes Irene's words in both of these passages, which elevates her to an active participant in these conversations and is yet another indication of her importance in the text. Theophanes is not attempting to minimize her participation in these events by having two church leaders call for the ecumenical council instead of her, but is rather emphasizing the proper roles that emperors and church officials should perform in relation to one another.

Although Constantine VI is somewhat sidelined in this account, only being mentioned in conjunction with his mother when mentioned at all, Theophanes' differentiation between the roles Irene and Constantine play is clear. Constantine's participation in the synod, even if primarily symbolic, is essential since he was heir to the throne. While Theophanes has no qualms about solely crediting Irene for her diplomatic and religious correspondence with Pope Hadrian, when it comes to summoning the bishops in the eastern half of the empire for the synod he makes sure to use the term "emperors" when saying who sent the invitations. When the council begins, Theophanes notes that "the emperors watched the proceedings."[143] After a digression, Theophanes credits "the emperor and his mother"[144] for the restoration of orthodoxy, subordinating Irene to Constantine in a rare moment while at the same time emphasizing her motherhood. This, of course, plays into the parallels he wishes to draw between Constantine I, who presided over the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, and his mother Helena, and Constantine VI and Irene. The records of the proceedings at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787

[143] Theophanes, AM 6278, Mango, 635.

[144] Theophanes, AM 6280, Mango, 637.

CE, list Constantine VI before Irene all but one time. These records explicitly compare the pair to Constantine I and Helena more than once, but they are always mentioned together and formally honored for their roles as pious rulers.[145] It could be that Theophanes, while willing to take risks to elevate Irene to a saintly position, was also trying to make the actual proceedings of the council as unassailable and legitimate as possible, even in the eyes of detractors. This might indicate an underlying fear that some might question the legitimacy of the iconophile position if he gave Irene primary credit or even gave both rulers equal credit when he recorded the reading and signing of the product of the council. This raises a question of whether proponents of iconoclasm might challenge the Council's legitimacy because of Irene's gender or, more likely, because Constantine VI was the blood heir to the throne while Irene had married into the imperial family, which made Constantine the more legitimate ruler.

Aside from that brief departure, Theophanes champions Irene's role in the proceedings to the exclusion of any unique action by Constantine. Although Constantine occupied the murky space between childhood and adulthood by Byzantine standards, at sixteen he was old enough for Theophanes to attribute imperial actions at the council to him regardless of reality.[146] Instead Theophanes chooses to firmly establish Irene in that role. In contrast, the 9th century *Life of*

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[145] This text is a translated version of the proceedings at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/nicea2.asp

[146] Béatrice Caseau, "Too Young to be Accountable: Is 15 Years old a Threshold in Byzantium?," in *Coming of Age in Byzantium: Adolescence and Family*, ed. Despoina Ariantzi (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2018), 19-28. Caseau notes that although there were varying metrics for determining adulthood depending on context, fifteen seemed to be one marker of new maturity for men in particular (22).

Theodora solidly attributes the Triumph of Orthodoxy to five-year-old Michael, Theodora's son for whom she served as regent.[147] Even though it is Theodora's *vita*, the author of that piece believes it is more appropriate for the male heir to be credited with the wide-ranging political and religious act that was the restoration of iconophile orthodoxy. It is possible that the *Life of Theodora* was a response to Theophanes' account of Irene. The second restoration of icons by a more palatable empress offered the opportunity to push back against a reign and a narrative that had stretched Byzantine gender norms to a breaking point. Theophanes' acceptance of Irene as a primary political and religious actor was disruptive. [148]

When the synod begins, some members of the army draw their swords and threaten violence because of their iconoclastic stance. Theophanes says, "When the empress attempted to restrain them through the men of her household who were present, they were not swayed, but added further insults."[149] While Irene maintains her authority, she is also intervening through her male entourage, as would be proper and expected for a woman. As can be seen throughout the narrative, Theophanes offers an unusual mix of descriptions suggesting Irene is conforming to gender norms while she is clearly defying, or, at the very least stretching, them. At this point in his narrative, Irene has lost control and the synod cannot continue. Not only does this indicate that a strong element of iconoclasm persisted even after the imperial change in policy regarding icons, but also that Irene's authority was in jeopardy. After this disruption, Irene enlists

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[147] Trans. and intro Vinson, *The Life of Theodora*, 354-355 and 374-375.

[148] The idea of Theodora being a more palatable iconophile saint and replacing Irene in popularity (hence Irene's role as "an inconvenient saint") was suggested by Mary Grace DuPree. I am indebted to our conversations and the valuable insight she provided.

[149] Theophanes, AM 6278, Mango, 635.

Staurakios — a trusted member of her court — to enact a clever plan where she gathers her armies and spreads false information about troop movements in order to capture the disloyal soldiers. Her actions are decisive and victorious. Although Staurakios exercises his influence, it is at Irene's command, and she is in control. It should be noted that Theophanes credits Irene's eunuch advisors heavily for being in control of the empire. At one point he says that "…the eunuch Staurakios, the patrician and logothete of the Course… was at the head of everything and administered all matters."[150] Despite the author's tendency to point toward the power of Irene's eunuchs, Irene is also frequently credited for action, creating a strange sense of the balance of power within the text.

After expelling the rebellious soldiers and establishing an army loyal to her, Irene reconvened the bishops. Theophanes says that "she once again sent messages to all parts inviting the bishops to present themselves at the city of Nicaea in Bithynia with a view to holding the synod there."[151] Constantine is entirely excluded or forgotten here, although he was mentioned when the bishops were summoned the first time. Theophanes supports Irene's expulsion of the iconoclastic soldiers. He gives no indications that coordinating military action would be inappropriate for a woman or beyond her capabilities. She is fulfilling one of her roles as both an empress (or an emperor) and an embodiment of Mary, that is, to protect and defend orthodoxy. This portrayal is a departure from gender mores seen in previous pieces of Byzantine literature. In a famous scene described in Procopius' *The Wars,* the 6th century empress Theodora gives a speech strongly objecting to the possibility that her husband Justinian might abdicate and urging

[150] Theophanes, AM 6274, Mango, 629.

[151] Theophanes, AM 6279, Mango, 636.

him to take military action.[152] As inspirational as this scene might seem to modern audiences, context tells scholars that it was supposed to be an indictment of Theodora's character because she was usurping her husband's role and acting like a man in an unacceptable, brazen way that reflected poorly on the unmanly Justinian.[153] Procopius' *Secret History,* as an invective, is written in a different genre than the *History of the Wars*, but it still gives the reader hints about how to read the more subtle negativity about Justinian and Theodora in the *History of the Wars*. Procopius' negative portrayal of Theodora in the *Secret History* as a manipulative woman who oversteps her bounds reflects negatively on Justinian.[154] On the other hand, Theophanes does not portray Irene's speeches to groups of men negatively and implies that her authority is legitimate and God-given, even in military matters, where her intelligent direction of affairs is undeniable. He does not take issue with her facilitation of the workings of the Church or the army on the basis of her gender, which is somewhat surprising.

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[152] Procopius, *History of the Wars*, I, xxiv, trans. H.B. Dewing (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 219-230, abridged and reprinted in Leon Barnard and Theodore B. Hodges, *Readings in European History*, (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 52-55.

[153] Neville, *Byzantine Gender*, 14-17.

[154] Leslie Brubaker, "Sex, Lies, and Textuality: The Secret History of Prokopios and the Rhetoric of Gender in Sixth-Century Byzantium," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M.H. Smith, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 98-101.

Irene and the Blinding of her Son

One of the most difficult events Theophanes must negotiate in terms of his attempt to portray Irene as a pious iconophile is the blinding of her son Constantine VI. Motherhood is a central feature of Byzantine women in literature. In his examination of a number of mothers in Byzantine texts Peter Hatlie notes that "Even when the mother in question was equally renowned for other attributes and roles that she adopted in life — such as being a famous empress, a great benefactress, or a saintly nun — her primary identification as a maternal figure is maintained."[155] Additionally, the association of the empress with the *Theotokos* carried with it sacred connotations of the significance of motherhood and virginity. Irene is a striking exception.

Pulcheria used Mary's virginity to shape her public image,[156] but Irene did not have that unique advantage. The primary way she could be linked to the Mother of God in the public eye was through her motherhood, which worked while she was regent with her son. By publicly engaging in such a stark violation of that sacred role, she cut herself off from some of the advantages of that association, but realistically she was also sending a strong message to those who would oppose her about the measures she was willing, and able, to take to maintain the throne. Because of the weight of motherhood in Byzantine literature and culture, the way Irene manages to transgress and yet thrive for a time is puzzling. The Mother of God, however, possesses more than one role, and Theophanes invokes those different roles to justify Irene's existence as a saint.

In his description of Constantine VI's blinding and death, Theophanes does not try to disavow Irene's direct involvement or the violence of the act. Theophanes says, "they blinded

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[155] Hatlie, "Images of Motherhood and Self," 43-44.

[156] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 173-174.

him in a cruel and grievous manner with a view to making him die at the behest of his mother and her advisers. The sun was darkened for seventeen days and did not emit its rays so that ships lost course and drifted about. Everyone acknowledged that the sun withheld its rays because the emperor had been blinded. In this manner his mother Irene acceded to power."[157] This is clearly not a positive event. The reference to an eclipse combines literary technique with (exaggerated) historical reality. While there was a solar eclipse that took place that month,[158] it certainly did not last for seventeen days. The dramatic effect of this exaggeration and the way it mirrors the nature of Constantine VI's death is meant to tell the reader that this event is something out of the ordinary. Irene's blinding of her son exceeds the normal allowable threshold of violence for the imperial family. Nature is reflecting the unnaturalness of Irene violation of her role as a mother in a very distinct way, but it is notable that Theophanes does not directly condemn Irene. With other rulers, he does not hesitate to explicitly mark their wickedness or impiety. This signals a real concern with Irene's reputation as an iconophile. The author handles this scene with a strange caution, trying to balance his various inclinations.

Earlier in the text, when Constantine VI blinds two contenders for the throne and cuts out the tongues of several other men who might try to take power, Theophanes says that "not for long did God's judgement leave this unjust deed unavenged: for after a lapse of five years, in the same month and also on a Saturday the same Constantine was blinded by his own mother."[159] This suggests that Irene is acting as an instrument of God's justice, which does not necessarily

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[157] Theophanes, AM 6288, Mango, 649.

[158] "Total Solar Eclipse of 797 August 26," NASA, accessed December 19, 2021, https://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/SEsearch/SEsearchmap.php?Ecl=07970826.

[159] Theophanes, AM 6284, Mango, 643.

imply that her moral character is good or evil, but does make the blinding inevitable to some degree. That interpretation is complicated somewhat by the text that comes right before it, however, where Theophanes indicates that Constantine blinds the potential rivals for the throne because he is "persuaded by the pleading of his mother and of Staurakios."[160] Theophanes squarely places the blame for these actions on the one who carried them out (Constantine VI) rather than the person doing the persuading (Irene). Irene has no culpability for that injustice and rather turns out to be the purveyor of God's punishment for it.

This incident is in sharp contrast with later events where Theophanes says that "the Devil, grudging the emperors' piety, inspired certain evil men to set the mother against her son and the son against his mother. They persuaded her that they had been informed through prophecies that, 'It is ordained by God that your son should not obtain the Empire, for it is yours, given to you by God.' Deceived, like the woman she was, and being also ambitious, she was satisfied that things were indeed so…"[161] In this passage, Theophanes attempts to deal with the uncomfortable tension between Irene's animosity toward her son and his inclination to link her to motherhood while honoring her as a righteous figure. He places the blame on the Devil and the people persuading her, rather than Irene herself, because of her gender. She is able to escape responsibility in a way that Constantine cannot as a man, whether she is in the position of the persuader or the persuaded.

While this trope might be seen as negative since it is based in ideas of female inferiority linked with the actions of Eve,[162]it provides an opportunity for Irene's story to function in a way

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[160] Theophanes*,* AM 6284, Mango, 643.

[161] Theophanes*,* AM 6282, Mango, 638.

[162] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 113.

that a male emperor's story might not be able to do. Despite the negative connotations, this denial of agency actually allows Irene to fill a unique space in Theophanes' text as a pious ruler who is involved in potentially unjust acts of violence throughout her reign. She is able to maintain her saintly elevation because Theophanes needs her as a strong iconophile figure. Irene can receive credit and respect for her pious actions without having to take the blame and repent for any of her actions that might not be consistent with an imperial saint. Negative perceptions of women are subverted to allow for her existence.

Herrin notes that the Byzantine stereotype of women as weak-willed individuals susceptible to deception relieves Irene of some responsibility, and points out how Theophanes contradicts himself by later implying Irene has managed to become manly when she "takes full responsibility for her actions."[163] Garland also explores the concept of the "protective stereotype" which might have actually allowed imperial women more independence and agency.[164] While Herrin's point about the negation of responsibility because of her gender holds, Theophanes is not necessarily contradicting himself later on in the text.

The Fall of Irene

After ten years ruling as a regent for her son, five years co-ruling with him, and five years ruling along, Irene was overthrown for good by Nikephoros I (r. 802 – 811 CE). Nikephoros was a patrician with a governmental role who managed to draw upon his influence to mount a

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[163] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 111-113.

[164] Lynda Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women: A Further Note on Conventions of Behaviour and Social Reality as Reflected in Eleventh and Twelfth Century Historical Sources," *Byzantion* 58, no. 2 (1988): 393.

successful coup.[165] The section describing Irene's fall from power is particularly full of saintly tropes that need to be read fully within that context. In discussing Irene's acknowledgement of responsibility, Herrin refers to the passage where Irene says, "I consider God [my helper and avenger] who raised me when aforetime I had been left an orphan and elevated me, unworthy though I was, to the imperial throne. The cause of my downfall I attribute to myself and to my sins and I cry out, 'In all things and in every manner may the name of the Lord be praised…'"[166] This text is formulaic in its expression of humility. Irene piously puts God's will above her own and ritually takes responsibility for her vague "sins." In hagiographical texts, saints commonly take responsibility for sins (even if they have not committed many), in the tradition of degrading the self in order to exalt God. Whether Theophanes is indicating that Irene actually is to blame for the unjust things she does is an entirely separate matter.

This is where the context of the surrounding passage comes into play. Theophanes makes a marked effort to elevate Irene's status as a good, pious woman. While references to her goodness and piety are sprinkled throughout, Theophanes is going further in this section, obviously painting Irene as a hero and Nikephoros as the villain. He remarks that "Men who lived a pious and reasonable life wondered at God's judgement, namely how He had permitted a woman who had suffered like a martyr on behalf of the true faith to be ousted by a swineherd…"[167] and also calls her "the wise and God-loving Irene,"[168] both of which are meant to situate her as an iconophile saint. By invoking the opinions of pious men, he is validating her

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[165] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 655.

[166] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 656.

[167] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 655.

[168] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 656.

legitimacy as a ruler. Theophanes needs to leave an overall positive impression in the minds of his readers because Irene was such a significant player in the restoration of icon veneration, which continued to be a point of tension while he was writing. The Second Council of Nicaea did not cause debates on the issue to cease completely, as can be seen from the fact that the empress Theodora later had to restore iconophile theology as orthodoxy for a second time in 843 CE.

Theophanes paints a picture of a city in mourning. He mentions Irene's benevolent "liberalities" [169] twice, in an effort to demonstrate both her worth as a good empress and as a woman. Generosity is one characteristic frequently expressed by Byzantine empresses in the form of patronage of religious establishments,[170] so it was a virtue both associated with the imperial family and obviously appropriate for women. In this case Irene's generosity is expressed in another form. Turtledove translates the passage that Mango translates as "liberalities"[171] as "enriched [those who turned against her] with huge gifts."[172] He also uses the word "benefactions"[173] later, when Nikephoros is said to have sent Irene further away because he is afraid people will want her to rule again. While Irene's relationship with motherhood is complicated, Theophanes can easily assign her the trait of generosity.

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[169] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 655 & 657.

[170] Dimirtiken, "Imperial Women and Religious Foundations in Constantinople," 175-177.

[171] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 655 & 657.

[172] Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes: An English Translation of Anni Mundi 6095-630 (A.D. 602-813) AM 6295*, trans. Harry Turtledove (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 159.

[173] Theophanes, AM 6295, Turtledove, 160.

Theophanes says that "A general gloom and inconsolable sadness gripped everyone."[174] The weather even changes, it "suddenly became on that day gloomy and lightless."[175] These descriptions parallel nature's reaction to Christ's impending death on the cross in Luke 23:44-47 when "darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining."[176] This darkness descending after Irene's downfall mirrors the eclipse that occurs after she blinds her son. As shown previously, unusual events in the natural world carry spiritual meanings. The weather's reaction to Irene's fall indicates not only that people were content under her rule and she was a good empress, but that ultimately her fall was a tragedy, as the blinding of Constantine was a tragedy. The natural world acts unnaturally in both cases, giving the lives of Constantine and Irene a mystical quality consistent with the kinds of events that take place in saints' lives. This dramatic portrait condemns the "usurper"[177] Nikephoros as much as affirms the rightful rule of Irene.

As an expression of her humility, Irene tells Nikephoros, "But, partly because I trusted your oaths, partly in order to spare you, I disregarded many of my well-wishers, in this case, too, referring my affairs to God, through whom kings reign and the mighty rule the earth. So now, too, inasmuch as you are pious and have been appointed by Him, I do obeisance to you as emperor and I beseech you to spare my weakness…"[178] Irene implies that Nikephoros was not true to his oaths, but she also humbly accepts her fate with only a mild hint in her tone that she

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[174] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 655.

[175] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 655-656.

[176] Luke 23:44-47, (New International Version, 2011).

[177] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 655.

[178] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 656.

may not view him as pious and divinely chosen. Yet Theophanes describes Nikephoros in the most negative of terms without holding back in the way Irene does. Irene's words are not meant to be taken as a factual statement concerning the moral character of Nikephoros. They also should not be misinterpreted as an example of naivety or stupidity on Irene's part, but rather as an indication of Irene's humility and piety. Theophanes is saying the words that Irene will not say because of her pious nature and is thus defending her. If Theophanes' descriptions are supposed to be interpreted by the reader as factually accurate, then the same understanding can be applied to Irene's words about her sins. Theophanes describes Irene in a saintly, positive light in this section, so the reader is supposed to believe Theophanes rather than Irene's pious self-deprecation.

Theophanes does not attribute Irene's fall to her sins generally or to any specific incident. He says, "Nikephoros, the patrician and logothete of the *genikon* (a fiscal branch of the government[179]), rebelled against the most pious Irene (God, in His inscrutable judgement having permitted this because of the multitude of our sins)."[180] The attribution of natural disasters and misfortunes in the empire to God's judgment because of the sins of the people is a common trope. Irene's fall from power is the punishment because Irene is a good ruler, according to Theophanes. This section recalls an earlier passage concerning the rise of the villainous Constantine V, which says, "In this year the subverter of our ancestral customs, Constantine,

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[179] Alexander Kazhdan, "Genikon," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford University Press, 1991), https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195046526.001.0001/acref-9780195046526-e-2040.

[180] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 655.

became emperor by God's judgement on account of the multitude of our sins."[181] In that case the punishment was the rule of a bad emperor. While Irene's fall is a punishment, it is a punishment of the people and not of her specifically because of her sins. Theophanes tries to use Irene as the antithesis of Constantine V and an iconophile saint, but his attempt is complicated by her other actions. While he cannot ignore them in the text itself, he can gloss over them in his telling of the end of her reign.

In addition to this, Irene's reference to her sins is too vague to imply that she is taking responsibility in any way beyond a rhetorical show of humility. Most of Theophanes' characters have a clear arc, as do traditional saints in terms of their morality. Constantine V is an evil man. Leo starts off as a morally upstanding ruler and then transitions into being a bad man who persecutes proponents of iconophile beliefs. Constantine VI is a slightly more complex case since he participates in the return of the relics of Euphemia and in the Second Council of Nicaea but then takes on more negative traits (from Theophanes' perspective) with his unjust act in blinding or cutting out the tongues of several individuals who could make a bid for the throne. Constantine participates in other questionable acts as well, such as when he "betrothed himself to her [Theodote] illegally."[182]

There are, however, also hints of a more positive view of Constantine VI along the way. In at least two significant places in the text — the inscription on the discovered coffin and during

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[181] Theophanes, AM 6295, Mango, 575.

[182] Theophanes, AM 6287, Mango, 645. See Chapter II ("Empress Irene in *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* – 'The Fall of Irene'). Constantine VI's quick remarriage to Theodote after his divorce of his first wife was deemed adulterous by some according to Herrin (Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 96-98.)

the Council of Nicaea — Constantine's name is listed first in more formal contexts. These both occur during the period when Irene is regent for her son rather than co-ruler or sole ruler. However, Theophanes names Constantine before Irene when he mentions their joint ascension, saying "...the most pious Irene together with her son Constantine were miraculously entrusted by God with the Empire so that in this matter also God might be glorified through a widow and her orphan son…"[183] In the beginning, Theophanes is invested in presenting Irene and Constantine in a way that invokes the ideas expressed in the beatitudes. At this point in Theophanes' narrative, the most significant element is the imagery of the humble mother and son. Theophanes is again characterizing the outcome for iconophile beliefs as positive by recalling the archetype of holy mother and son (as seen in Mary and Jesus and also Constantine I and Helena). While Constantine VI, like Irene, is also considered an Eastern Orthodox saint, he does not receive the same amount of praise or honorifics as his mother. Irene is called pious at least six times, but Constantine's piety is mainly referenced in conjunction with his mother's. One example of this is when the text mentions "the emperors' piety."[184] Theophanes ultimately focuses his attention on Irene as the champion of icons rather than Constantine. Part of the reason for this might be that, as an adult, Irene was clearly more heavily involved in the affirmation of icon veneration at the Second Council of Nicaea and, altogether, she ruled longer than her son did.

Theophanes does not actively condemn Constantine VI as a wicked man the way he does Constantine V, but in the end his portrayal is less than positive. Constantine VI becomes a secondary and nearly neutral character. While Constantine VI's morality as a ruler is complicated like Irene's because Theophanes does not strictly define him as a saint or a sinner,

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[183] Theophanes, AM 6273, Mango, 626.

[184] Theophanes, AM 6282, Mango, 638.

the contrast in the morality of Irene's various actions is much sharper. Theophanes is forced to deal with Irene's complexity in a way that makes her portrayal different than that of other rulers.

If a sinful person becomes a saint, they usually have a moment of repentance where they effectively transition from a morally bad person to a morally good, if still somewhat imperfect, person. This can be seen in the story of St Paul in the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, for example. In these repentance narratives, the figures directly identify their sins and from that point on move forward into their saintly lives. Saint Mary of Egypt tells the salacious tale of her sins in great detail and then describes her conversion experience.[185] Betancourt states that, "Placing her beyond excuse for her actions, Mary is made to say that her deeds were justified by neither poverty or calamity."[186] This is radically different from the way Theophanes handles Irene's violence. Saint Mary of Egypt's repentance of specific sins is clear. No such thing takes place with Irene who is involved in the Second Council of Nicaea, which oversees the restoration of icon veneration, in 787 CE, ten years before she blinds her son. Theophanes praises Irene for her pious nature years after the blinding without any scene of repentance specifically concerning the transgression. Her acknowledgment of her sins is a formality that cannot be counted as either a scene of repentance or as a legitimate acknowledgment of what would certainly be considered sins by the church under normal circumstances. As a figure, Irene does not possess a clear moral arc in Theophanes, which marks her as both unique and troubling.

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[185] "Life of St. Mary of Egypt," in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot and trans. Maria Kouli, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 80-85.

[186] Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 2.

Empress Irene proved to be an inconvenient saint for Theophanes and presumably Byzantine society at large. While she sometimes participated in furthering the association of imperial women with the *Theotokos*, she also did not hesitate to take the political actions necessary to maintain her power, even if they conflicted with the motherhood by which she was supposed to be defined. Irene herself defied definition, which left Theophanes to try to navigate her significant role in the iconophile movement along with the problematic aspects of her reign. Surprisingly, the issue he needs to overcome is not her gender as the sole ruler of the empire, but rather her violation of her role as a mother paired with her existence as a saint and an empress. Gender does play a role by ironically relieving her of responsibility for her transgressions while allowing her to remain an exalted saint. These contradictions ultimately result in one of the most complex and nuanced accounts of an imperial reign within *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*.

Chapter IV. Irene's Imperial Legacy

Irene is far from the only medieval woman to hold political power. While it is true that certain ambitious women throughout history have been able to seize power despite the gendered expectations of their respective societies, each woman has done so within her own context with varying results. Irene's trajectory created an altered framework of power for the imperial Byzantine women who came after her. She herself was building upon the traditions of previous powerful imperial women, the female archetypes established by the practice of Eastern Orthodoxy, and the visual aspect of court ritual and iconophile beliefs to support her public use of those archetypes.

Some denizens in the west criticized Irene's role as emperor due to her gender,[187] but there were also a number of royal women who held power in western Europe throughout the Middle Ages. Although the Church in both the east and the west played a role in political power and the formation of certain ideas about gender, other cultural influences were just as strong in the development of those ideas in each geographic region. It is essential that the cultural uniformity of gender roles is not overestimated while investigating the influence of understandings of gender promoted by Church leaders. The power structures in western Europe at the time were precarious to say the least, divided into numerous kingdoms. The pope in Rome had some influence on royal families across Europe to varying degrees, but far less influence than he would later possess.

Women rulers in the west — such the 9th century Frankish Queen Emma of Altdorf and the 10th century Saxon queen Mathilda — shared some similarities with Byzantine empresses in terms of expressions of Marian piety and motherhood being central to their roles, but most had

[187] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 121.

considerably less direct power than Irene.[188] Female power in these instances was almost exclusively tied to their relationships with men as mother, sisters, wives, and daughters. That is true for the majority of Byzantine imperial women as well, including Irene, whose power was originally derived from her relationship to her husband and son.[189] Byzantine history embraced the idea of co-rulers, which had its root in the organizational framework of multiple ruling emperors originated by Diocletian. The structure of four emperors — two in each half of the Roman empire — eventually resulted in the split of the empire and the emergence of the Eastern Roman empire as its own entity. Imperial women in Byzantium often employed the same tactic of establishing a male co-ruler, either to legitimize their own exercise of power or as a conduit to legitimize the more powerful man's reign.[190] Pulcheria, who was of royal blood, married Marcian in order to maintain her rule in 450 CE.[191]

Other medieval queens exercised power through marriages as well. The 10th century Carolingian Empress Engelberga governed as regent while her husband was away.[192] Earenfight states, concerning a later 10th century Empress of the same dynasty, that "Adelheid was considered a *consors regni/imperii* (co-ruler of the realm or empire).[193] Another, older example of a woman utilizing joint rule with a man in western Europe is the Ostrogothic queen Amalasuntha, who held power in Italy as a regent for her son Amalric while Justinian I ruled the

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[188] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 97-99.

[189] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 46; 87.

[190] Lung, "Depictions of Women in the Works of Early Historians and Chroniclers," 11.

[191] Lung, "Depictions of Women in the Works of Early Historians and Chroniclers," 10-11.

[192] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 97.

[193] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 99-100.

Byzantine Empire (r. 527 – 565 CE). While she did rule in her own right for a brief period of time, she soon chose a man to rule with her, her cousin Theodahad.[194] That decision ended in Theodahad murdering her and claiming the throne.

Another useful comparison to Irene is Balthild of Chelles (7th century CE) — a queen of Neustria who exercised power as a regent for her son Chlothar III (r. 657 – 662 CE) but was later forced into monastic life. Eventually she was elevated to sainthood.[195] This trajectory demonstrates some similarities in the way the intertwined threads of political power and the Church impacted women in both the east and the west. Earenfight notes the importance of saintly Christian queens in a form of queenship that developed in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in which the role of the family was crucial to monarchy.[196]

This strategy existed both before and after Irene's reign, but an intriguing trend of female co-rulership as a concept emerges after Irene asserts her claim to the throne as sole ruler. An early appearance of that concept emerges in the hagiography of Princess Anthousa, the daughter of Constantine V. The *Life of St Anthousa* states that Irene repeatedly asked Anthousa to rule with her, but Anthousa refused, presumably because she wished to pursue a holy life of humility.[197] It is not mentioned in the text when this request occurred. Later, the sisters Zoë and Theodora Porphyrogenita ruled together as co-emperors in the 11th century, although only

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[194] Lung, "Depictions of Women in the Works of Early Historians," 10-11.

[195] "Balthild, Queen of Neustria (d. ca. 680) & Balthild: Abbess of Chelles (d. Ca. 700)" in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. and trans. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, E. Gordon Whatley (Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 1992), 264-288.

[196] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 74-75.

[197] "The Life of Saint Anthousa," Constas, 23.

briefly. It is difficult to imagine that two women ruling the empire by themselves would have been considered a possibility before Irene's reign. The rule of both Zoë and Theodora Porphyrogenita together is part of a larger pattern of imperial female kinship and loyalty that Herrin refers to in discussing the persistence of iconophile beliefs among other imperial women of the 8th and 9th centuries like Euphrosyne and the iconophile empress Theodora.[198]

Irene's situation is particularly intriguing in that she was able to rule in her own right when she was not of royal blood. She married into the imperial family and had no blood claim to the throne. Her link to imperial rule existed through her marriage and the fact that she gave birth to an imperial heir. In that respect, Irene was more like Balthild. Once she had her son blinded, Irene had no particularly solid link to the imperial family. Despite Irene's outsider status, her claim on the throne persisted and does not seem to be questioned by Theophanes. Irene did not inherit any of her power through an established legal framework. There was no precedent for an imperial woman who was not originally of royal blood to inherit the throne without immediately marrying a powerful man to secure her power. Additionally, by the time Irene became sole emperor, she was likely past child-bearing age and could not produce another heir herself. She did not even have the potential to become a mother again and establish a new bloodline. Yet, her legitimacy is seemingly unquestioned by Byzantine historians. Her rise is perhaps even more surprising in light of those circumstances. Even Pulcheria, a woman of royal blood who also ascended the throne past child-bearing age, still married a man to secure the throne.[199] The goal of marriage in the Eastern Roman Empire extended beyond the production of an heir — something often emphasized more in western royal marriages — especially given that Pulcheria

[198] Herrin, *Women in Purple,* 178-180.

[199] Lung, "Depictions of Women in the Works of Early Historians and Chroniclers," 10-11.

used her virginity as a political tool and made it known that her marriage to Marcian was platonic.[200]

The continuity and centrality of the traditions of imperial female rulers in Constantinople offered a foundation that might have allowed for sole women rulers to emerge more quickly in the east than the west. The element that makes Irene stand out in comparison to the majority of female rulers in the west is her ability to rule the empire in her own right instead of as regent. Even more surprising, however, is the lack of strong condemnation of her actions within the Byzantine Empire on the basis of her gender. It is entirely possible that she did face criticism on that front from Church leadership in the east, but if she did no record of it survives, which is a topic worthy of further scholarship. The exercise of immense power was not limited to women who ruled in their own right, but when it occurs it indicates a shift in the state and society's gendered expectations.

Examining female rulers and sainthood in Russia is another fruitful avenue of comparison, especially given that the rulers of Kievan Rus' adopted the practice of Orthodoxy directly from Constantinople. According to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, a royal woman named Olga (r. 945 – 960 CE) was the first Rus'sian to convert to Christianity. While that legendary claim is inaccurate, multiple sources establish that Olga's baptism took place in Constantinople sometime in the 10th century with the involvement of the Byzantine emperor himself.[201] As regent for her son Sviatoslav I (r. 945 – 972 CE), Olga was a sharp woman known

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[200] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 208-209.

[201] Andrzej Poppe, "Once Again Concerning the Baptism of Olga, Archontissa of Rus'," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 46, Homo Byzantinus: Papers in Honor of Alexander Kazhdan (1992): 271.

for avenging her dead husband, Igor of Kiev (r. 912 CE – 945 CE). When Igor was murdered, Olga lured three different groups of Drevlians (the people who had killed him) to her court with promises and trickery before having them murdered through various means. The first group got buried alive, the second was burned in a locked building, and finally the third was massacred while drunk.[202] On the whole, Irene's disposal of her enemies was less brutal, and the punishments she chose were reasonable by Byzantine convention.

While Orthodoxy was officially implemented as the state religion of Kievan Rus' later in 988 CE during the reign of her grandson Vladimir I, Olga initiated that transition during her reign through her conversion. An alliance with the Byzantine empire was a smart move politically and economically for the states of Kievan Rus', but beyond that, Olga was drawing upon the Byzantine tradition of imperial female power for her own purposes. Byzantine Eastern Orthodoxy had an established niche for women rulers. From the foundational mother and son relationship between Helena and Constantine I to Irene's sometimes violent reign sanctioned by Church history through her sainthood, Olga must have found Orthodoxy particularly attractive and useful. *The Russian Primary Chronicle* says, "At her baptism she was christened Helena, after the ancient empress, mother of Constantine the Great."[203] This event took place only about 150 years after Irene's death.

The rulers of Kievan Rus' adopted the Byzantine tradition of imperial sainthood, but with perhaps a different result than Olga intended. While Olga and several other women exercised a

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[202] *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, trans. and ed. by Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Herbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953): 78-82.

[203] *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, Cross, 82.

good deal of power within the region, a woman did not rule in her own right in Russia until Catherine I in 1725 CE. Part of the reason for this is likely rooted in a similar issue as occurred in Western Europe. Kievan Rus' was a politically fluid region with shifting states, rulers, and near-constant political upheaval. There was a large royal family, but the concept of royal sainthood was not nearly as consistent in its unified ideology and tradition as it was for imperial Byzantine women. A shift occurred, however, when Ivan the Terrible became the first ruler to take on an imperial title in 1547, specifically staking his claim as part of the tradition embodied by Byzantine rulers. Around this time, a certain ideology emerged that viewed Russia as the third Rome.[204] Under this school of thought the Russian emperor was the true emperor. After the Byzantine empire fell in 1453 CE, Russian rulers came to conceptualize themselves as the successors of the Byzantine empire in a multitude of ways and their legitimacy was confirmed by their shared history of Orthodox practice. The trajectory of sainthood in imperial Russia differed from that of Byzantine sainthood in some significant ways, but a shared foundation still existed.

Catherine I ruled roughly two hundred to three hundred years after that transition into imperial ideology started in Russia. Irene ruled three hundred to four hundred years after what might be considered the establishment of a Christianized imperial tradition in Byzantium, which could be dated from the foundation of Constantinople by Constantine I in 330 CE or the deposition of the last Roman emperor in the west in 476 CE. In both of these cases, a sense of a unified imperial tradition appears to be an important element in the rise of women able to rule in their own right. But, even before that, Olga was able to harness imperial religious imagery to support her power.

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[204] Filofei, "Moscow the Third Rome," https://pages.uoregon.edu/sshoemak/325/texts/moscow_the_third_rome.htm.

Emperor Irene undoubtedly set a precedent for the centuries that would follow. As the first female emperor of the Roman empire, Irene took advantage of the flexibility provided by the Eastern Orthodox framing of Christianity paired with a strong tradition of imperial womanhood to support her rise to power in the eyes of the public. Byzantine imperial power relied on the abstract symbolism of ritual. The roles of defender and intercessor traditionally belonged to both the emperor as God's mouthpiece on earth and to the Virgin Mary. Irene utilized those archetypes to her advantage in order to embody both roles. In addition to escaping her designated role by ruling in her own right, Irene accomplished a rare thing by escaping the "whore or Madonna" dichotomy foisted on women in most texts. In Theophanes' efforts to paint Irene as an iconophile saint despite her violent actions, he was forced to consider her as a nuanced character. Writing soon after her demise, he could not fully mythologize her, but Byzantine conceptions of gender still play a role in his account. Leaving a powerful legacy in her wake, Irene of Athens endures as an inconvenient saint.

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