

## 5 General Conclusions

At the outset of this study, several questions were posed that guided my analysis of the historical, literary, and liturgical texts pertaining to key Passion relic objects—as well as of the objects themselves—in the Great Palace of Constantinople in the Middle Byzantine period. These questions framed my approach to understanding how the interaction of these sacred objects with the emperor demonstrated, impacted, or evinced a sense of the emperor as a sacred figure, and how this imperial sacrality was expressed and understood. As with all historical inquiries, we as investigators of the past can only search for answers and make interpretations based on the materials that survive and come down to us. Admittedly, the texts and material objects that form the core of the three case studies presented here—the Mandyllion, the Limburg Staurotheke, and the Holy Stone—all come from the highest levels of Byzantine society, the lofty circles around the Great Palace, and the sacred treasury contained inside the Pharos chapel nestled within palace walls. We cannot surmise here how the common masses of Middle Byzantine society thought of or perceived imperial sacrality, or whether such an idea was even important to them and their lives. Indeed, even in these three cases of objects and texts from the rarefied elite echelons of Constantinople, some of the sources that we have examined here only survive in a single manuscript collection; for some sources, the originals have been lost and we are left with remnants of the object, sketches of sarcophagus covers, snippets of hymns. Yet even these crumbs that have fallen to us from the imperial masters' table have proven to be enough food for thought.

Through the lens of these three Passion relics from the Great Palace, I have shown that a special relationship between these relics and the Byzantine rulers was perceived to exist and was elaborated upon in word, image, and action. Beginning with the translation of the Mandyllion to Constantinople in 944, passing to the curation and creation of relics in the Limburg Staurotheke in the latter half of the tenth century, and concluding with the translation of the Holy Stone from Ephesos to the Queen of Cities in 1169, my close readings of texts—guided by an interdisciplinary methodology involving philological scrutiny, (art-)historical criticism, and patristic/associative readings—has shown that this connection between relics and rulers grew and changed over the course of two and a half centuries. If in the case of the Mandyllion, we find a sense of the imperial office imbued with a general sacrality (applicable to all rulers and shared by the ruler with city, laity, and clergy), this general sacrality slowly shifts to a specific sacrality, where the specific person of the emperor, rather than the imperial office, is understood as being sacred and holy. This personal connection makes an appearance in the inscription of names on the cross relic and Staurotheke case, and erupts into a near complete conflation of Emperor Manuel with Christ in 1181.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the three relics examined in this study are all intimately linked with the emperor and housed in the Great Palace, the rhetoric

surrounding emperor and relic shifts across time and in different spatial and artistic contexts. In my close reading of the historical accounts and liturgical texts pertaining to the arrival of the Mandylion in Constantinople, what emerges is not a stress on funerary imagery or the crucifixion of Christ—which event occasions the creation of the icon-relic in the legends—but rather an emphasis on civic protection and the involvement of the entire urban populace, with the emperor naturally at the head, in a relationship with this translated palladium. The theme of protection is continued in the inscriptions brought onto the relic of the True Cross contained within the Limburg Staurotheke and in the military harangues issued by Constantine VII and pronounced to his troops along with the gift of water/oil blessed by contact with the relic amalgam. But with the Staurotheke, we find that the inscription texts move away from a general association of object with sovereign and citizens to a specific link between it and individually named rulers. Simultaneously, the power of the relics contained in the assemblage is seen not only as protective but also as combative and able to grant offensive military might. Finally, in the case of the Holy Stone, everything from the historical accounts and liturgical texts narrating the object's translation to Constantinople, to the removal of the Stone from the Palace to the Pantokratōr monastery, and the pedestal poem composed on this occasion, radically change the rhetorical focus to a specific emperor, Manuel, with the identification of ruler and relic in the surviving texts leading to a near-identification of ruler with the divine, with perhaps Manuel's own individual identity becoming secondary to that of the divine Christ, of whom he was a living, 'iconic' image, at once mortal and divine—a shift in identity brought about by the conjunction of ruler, relics, and the palatine chapels housing the latter.<sup>1</sup>

The underlying cause for these rhetorical shifts remains unclear from the sources examined here: was it political, economic, social, or perhaps even environmental changes that lent themselves to holding up a sacred, divine emperor as a source of continuity and control in changing times, and taking advantage of the presence of these relics in the Great Palace as a convenient means to enable this projection of imperial sacrality? Did the emperors themselves come to see a self-image as sacred ruler as something helpful in securing peace and stability during their reigns (an option suggested by the specific names in the Staurotheke inscriptions and Manuel's

1 This phenomenon has been most recently and succinctly pointed out in IVANOVICI 2023, 56: "Like imperial garments, the symbolic spaces of the palace were essential in establishing the ruler as a living image of God. ... imperial iconicity had been transferred [sc. by the early Byzantine period, as Ivanovici argues] to specific material settings and props, and the ruler's identity had become secondary. There had to be a ruler in Constantinople whose body functioned as a living image of the Christian God in order to make Byzantine society into a human replica of Christ's court, but his iconicity was conferred by their imperial functional and the spaces and accoutrements, rather than by his character and actions." On such iconicity not bringing about a conceptual change in how the body of the emperor was understood ontologically, cf. *ibid.*, 184.

Emmanuel propaganda in coinage and liturgical texts)? Were rhetoricians simply being increasingly carried away by the need to impress and flatter their royal patrons near the end of the Middle Byzantine era?<sup>2</sup> The search for answers to these questions offers many avenues for further research on relics and power in Byzantium.

With the loss of the Passion relics in the wake of the Fourth Crusade, and the loss of Eastern Roman rule over Constantinople until 1261, the sense of personal sacrality or divinity on the part of the emperor, generated by the presence and interaction of holy relics with him within the Great Palace, certainly waned. Following the restoration of Byzantine authority under the Palaiologans, imperial sacrality and election as the Lord's Anointed could not be assumed or imbued by the relics—material oil blessed not directly by Christ and his relics, but indirectly by priests and patriarchs, had to make this mark on the sovereign's head. Yet the spark of holiness within the relics themselves was perceived as having endured, as we can see in the construction of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris and the *mise-en-scène* of the Passion relics there as instituted by King Louis IX, providing him with a further basis for his sobriquet of *saint*, “holy”.<sup>3</sup> The shifting understanding of the divine and sacred character of the emperor in Byzantium thus moves even outside the bounds of the Empire, with the Passion relics taken to Western Europe continuing to mould and shape understandings of divine and divinised rule(rs) in new locales for centuries to come. In his magisterial study of faith and politics in Byzantium, Gilbert Dagron juxtaposed the roles of emperor and priest in an attempt to shed light on how the Byzantine basileus was perceived as being sacred and set apart from his fellow human beings.<sup>4</sup> More than *empereur et prêtre*, I would argue that the sources examined here suggest an additional pairing, namely that of *empereur et dieu*: a trope barely perceptible in the sources pertaining to the Mandylion and incredibly blatant in the texts for the Holy Stone. Just how much credence poets like Prodhromos and patrons like the Komnēnian emperors actually gave to the language of “divine emperors” cannot be skimmed from the words surviving on parchment and etched into metal and stone. And yet, from the rhetoric at least, and for a time in the Great Palace during the Middle Byzantine era, the presence of the Passion relics in imperial possession allowed for the emperor to be perceived in some way as mediating between earth and heaven, sitting on the throne as the Lord's anointed, spoken of as both emperor and god.

- 2 On individualism and patronage in Middle Byzantine poets—a notable example being Theodore Prodhromos, mentioned at the end of the previous chapter—see MAGDALINO 2013a.
- 3 For more on Louis IX's reign, especially given the context of his activity in the Crusades, as well as the Sainte-Chapelle, there exists an extensive bibliography; see for example: W. JORDAN 1979, LE GOFF 1996, A. JORDAN 2002, DURAND 2016, NICOLOTTI 2014 (esp. pp. 188–200 on the Holy Face at the Sainte-Chapelle), and FREIGANG 2021.
- 4 On this sanctity and set-apart-ness of Roman and Byzantine emperors from a religious/philosophical viewpoint, see also the magnum opus of AGAMBEN 1998.