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Defining Female Authority in Eighth-Century Byzantium: The Numismatic Images of the Empress Irene (797–802)

This study offers insight into the complex processes through which an unusual ruler, the empress Irene, articulated her authority in visual terms. An examination of the numismatic iconography of her gold coins demonstrates how the public imagery of this female ruler was crafted by carefully joining together a wide network of associations that draw extensively on both male and female imperial predecessors and figures of religious authority. It is suggested that while remaining within the narrow confines of eighth century numismatic style and iconography, Irene’s coinage presents her both as a reigning monarch and a personification of her most important imperial accomplishment, religious peace. Furthermore, the imagery also conveys a novel iconophile message and casts the empress as an orthodox and philanthropic ruler.

As the most widely available imperial public images, coins enunciated fundamental notions about power, and offer insight into the complex processes through which rulers articulated their authority in visual terms in the late antique and Byzantine periods. The official imagery of the Byzantine empress

Irene (797–802) demonstrates how a dynastic crisis and a rupture in the exercise of imperial power—conceived as a role fit for a man—could be negotiated by a woman. Irene ascended to power in 780 upon the sudden death of her husband, Leo IV. For the next ten years, she served as regent for their underage son, Constantine VI. In December 790 Constantine banished Irene from the palace, yet recalled her from exile in January 792. Constantine's rule ended in August 797, when he was arrested, blinded, and exiled upon the command of his mother. Irene governed independently until she was deposed on 30 October 802.²

The solidi of Irene's sole reign (797–802) issued in Constantinople epitomize the most innovative devices of her visual propaganda (Fig. 1).³ With a design consisting of portrait busts only, they carry identical legends and types of the empress on both sides. Irene, rendered with a stylized bust, wears a crown and holds prominent symbols of authority, the globus cruciger and the cross scepter. She is dressed in the loros, a long and narrow jewel encrusted band made from leather or heavy silk, wrapped around the upper torso in the shape of an X with one end hanging down to the feet and the other draped over an arm. The legends identify her as “Irene Empress.”⁴ Identical effigies also appear on Irene’s copper coins and the lead seals of customs officials (Fig. 2).


⁴ A control mark (Θ, X, ©) placed after the legend distinguishes the reverse side. For control marks, see DOC 3.1.77–81. For the loros, see Jennifer L. Ball, Byzantine Dress, Representations of Secular Dress in Eight- To Twelfth-century Painting (New York/Houndmills, 2005), 11–29.
Although Irene’s coins have been discussed frequently, a full analysis of the numismatic imagery of her sole reign has not been undertaken because scholars have focused on coins of the regency, with most attention directed at dating the issues.\(^5\) An examination of Irene’s independent coinage reveals how this unusual ruler, a woman exercising full imperial power, crafted her public image by interlocking a network of associations that drew on male and female imperial predecessors and figures of religious authority. Her portrayal combined the schematic frontal bust, established on imperial coins since the

seventh century, with a simple yet highly meaningful legend. Although the design and style of her coins followed the numismatic tradition of her immediate predecessors, subtle alterations drawn from coins of the fifth through the early eighth centuries conveyed profoundly new meanings.

This study thus suggests that Irene’s solidi expressed a novel iconophile message, which distanced her from her iconoclastic predecessors while also associating her with the tradition of orthodox rulership; she was presented as both a philanthropic monarch and a personification of her chief accomplishment, religious peace. Following common Byzantine visual tradition, Irene’s image constructed innovative meanings through the use of minute variations of established iconographic types. Therefore, this investigation first explores the numismatic tradition from which Irene’s coin imagery emerged and then examines the gold coins of her sole reign in order to demonstrate how her numismatic representations were invested with new meaning.

The Numismatic Context

Irene’s image first appeared on gold and copper coins in 780 when she became regent for her son (Figs. 3–4), and her countenance remained on the coinage until her deposition in 802. No imperial seals survive from the regency depicting Constantine and Irene together, although lead seals of kommerkiarioi used similar imperial imagery and inscriptions as gold and copper coins, suggesting a wider use of their public image. Irene’s coins and seals are especially important as they offer the only securely identified extant visual representations of empresses between 641 and the 830s, bridging the gap between images of late antique and middle Byzantine empresses.

Empresses appeared on early Byzantine coins with varying frequency. Coins depicted four empresses from 324 to 337 and eleven imperial women between 383 and 491. Usually, each empress is rendered with a profile bust

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on the obverse, while one or more personifications, and later the cross or a Victory holding the cross, appear on the reverse (Figs. 5–6). The Ravennate and Roman solidi of Licinia Eudoxia of 439, however, show different iconography. The obverses carry Eudoxia’s frontal bust dressed in a *chlamys* (a long, rectangular cloak fastened with a fibula at the right shoulder), whereas

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10 Fifth-century marriage *solidi*, however, show atypical iconography, see Grierson-Mays, *LRC*, 145, 158, pl. 15.395; *DOC* 1.4–5, pl. 1.2.
the reverses depict her enthroned figure holding the globus cruciger and cross scepter (Fig. 7). Roman coins of 455 also diverge from numismatic tradition: the obverses represent Licinia Eudoxia’s frontal bust in the predecessor of the loros, the trabea (Fig. 8). The trabea was a purple or gold jewel-studded ceremonial toga of the Roman consul draped around the body. The reverses depict the trabea-clad emperor holding a mappa and a cross scepter and the empress carrying a cross scepter.\footnote{Grierson-Mays, LRC, 244–245, pl. 34.870; RIC X, 165, 168–169, pl. 49.2016, 2023, 51.2046. For the chlamys and the trabea, see Ball, Byzantine Dress, 12, 29–33.}

Empresses were missing from coins from 491 to 565 but reappeared between 565 and 641, when portraits of five imperial women were stamped
on copper and silver coins (Fig. 9). In this period, empresses appeared on gold coins only in the company of other imperial figures (for example, husband and/or child), so after 491 no gold coins were minted solely in their names. After the reign of Justin II (565–578), names of empresses were not even inscribed on the coins, and numismatic representations of early Byzantine empresses gradually lost their specificity and independence to become

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12 Sophia, Anastasia, Constantina, Leontia, Martina.
13 James, Empresses and Power, 110; Anne L. McClanan, Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses: Image and Empire (New York, 2002), 158–163. Although the issuing authority was always the emperor, coins of empresses often made no direct reference to the emperor prior to 491, see Grierson-Mays, LRC, 6–8.
anonymous symbols of the unity and stability of the ruling house and the empire.\textsuperscript{14} After 641 the production of coins with images of empresses stopped altogether and was not revived until coins were minted in 780 with Irene’s likeness. The introduction of Irene’s portrait into the coinage thus must have appeared as a significant departure from recent numismatic tradition.

Little is known about the process in which numismatic types and legends were designed and it is unclear how the ruler and his/her advisers were involved in designing the new coin types. Nonetheless, given that coins were closely associated with the exercise of imperial power and the head of the mint was a member of the imperial administration, one may suppose that Irene and her advisers would have been consulted about coin designs.\textsuperscript{15}

Although Irene’s portrait was absent from her husband’s coins, her image appeared on the first gold issue of her nine-year old son (Class I, 780–792): busts of Irene and Constantine VI were shown on the obverse and seated figures of Constantine’s predecessors (Leo IV, Constantine V, and Leo III) on the reverse (Fig. 3).\textsuperscript{16} Copper coins and lead seals carried the same imagery.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Brubaker-Tobler, “Gender of Money.”
\item \textsuperscript{16} Classification is adopted from DOC 3.1.340–41. For coins of the regency, see ibid., 336–46; Morrisson, Catalogue des monnaies byzantines 2.488–95; Eadem, “L’impératrice Irène (780–802).”
\item \textsuperscript{17} For copper coins, see DOC 3.1.344–46. For lead seals of the kommerkiarioi, see Zacos-Veglery, Byzantine Lead Seals, 1.1.350–54, no. 273–76; Oikonomides, Dated Seals, 52, no. 42; and DOSeals, 1.162, no. 71.19.
\end{itemize}
Undoubtedly, Irene’s image appeared alongside her son’s in order to counteract the imperial aspirations of her brothers-in-law. Irene and Constantine each hold a *globus cruciger* in the right hand and the empress carries the cross scepter in her left on the solidi. The inscription refers to Irene as empress and mother and to Constantine as emperor and lord. The earlier coins of the first issue (Class Ia, 780–790) placed Irene’s name in the honorable position on the obverse, while Constantine’s name was relegated to the reverse. Yet, following Constantine’s temporary capture of sole power in 790, later coins of this issue (Class Ib, 790–792) changed the placement of the inscriptions along with the attributes—Irene no longer carried the *globus cruciger* and Constantine’s name appeared on the obverse (Fig. 4). Irene’s representations fit with numismatic tradition of the mid-sixth to the mid-seventh centuries, when empresses appeared only in the company of other imperial figures on coins, and also continued Isaurian dynastic imagery, which often showed several generations of emperors on a single coin (Figs. 10–11). Irene was cast as a link in a chain of imperial succession emphatically connecting the past, present, and future; this was underscored by the legend, which identified her as the emperor’s mother.

The second gold issue (Class II) carries busts of Irene and her son on the obverse and reverse, respectively; the name of Constantine is followed by the abbreviated title *basileus*, while Irene is given a full title, *augusta*. (Fig. 12). The empress again holds the *globus cruciger* and cross scepter, while the emperor clasps the *globus cruciger* and the *akakia*. Morrisson and Missiou connected this issue with Constantine’s independent rule in 790, while more convincingly, Bellinger and Grierson linked it with Irene’s return from banishment in 792–797. Copper coins and lead seals also employed the same style.

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18 For the plots of Constantine’s uncles, see Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 60–63.
20 However, see Bellinger, “Byzantine Notes,” 127–31, for different dating.
21 See DOC 3.1.338, 341. However, Morrisson, *Catalogue des monnaies byzantines*, 2,490, dates Class Ib to 792 or to 790–797.
23 “IRInH AFOVS1 ConStAnTNoSbAS’ ”, DOC 3.1.341.
24 Constantine’s face remained beardless even after he had reached adulthood.
25 Morrisson, *Catalogue des monnaies byzantines*, 2,489–490; Dionyssia Missiou, “Σάδωνα βασιλείας Κωνσταντίνου ΣΤ’ και Ειρήνης καὶ τὰ νομίσματα τους,” Βυζαντιακα 1 (1981), 139–56, at 151; Bellinger, “Byzantine Notes,” 129–31; DOC 3.1.340–42. Vasso Penna dated Class II to 787–797 linking it with the Council of Nicaea (787), see Eadem, *Byzantine Monetary Affairs during the 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th Centuries* (Ph.D. diss., Wolfson College, Oxford, 1991), 18–21. This would unreasonably separate Class Ia and Ib, which share nearly identical iconography and are connected through a die link, see Füeg, “Solidusausgaben,” Tabelle VI. Franz Füeg, *Corpus of
Both issues of the regency enunciated dynastic concerns: Irene was portrayed as an empress mother who ensured the succession of her son, the designated heir to the throne.

Reviving earlier coin types appears to have been standard practice at the mint of Constantinople. Thus, Irene’s coin effigies share numerous features
with Licinia Eudoxia’s numismatic portraits (for example, the frontal bust, crown design, consular garment, *globus cruciger*, and cross scepter). Although the chronological gap between them is over three centuries and Licinia’s issues were minted in Italy, these coins could have nonetheless served as prototypes for Irene’s representations. Byzantine solidi circulated widely, and coins of Licinia easily could have been preserved in Constantinople, especially because Licinia, who had been raised in Constantinople as the daughter of the eastern emperor Theodosius II (402–450), spent her waning years there and no doubt had examples of her Italian coins in her possession. As empresses had not been shown on coins from 641 to 780 at all, and their carefully rendered portrait busts were absent from coinage since 491, it would not be surprising if Irene’s image makers, lacking recent precedents, revived the frontal bust portraits of Licinia’s Italian coins, which fit with the contemporary schematic style of frontal numismatic effigies. Licinia’s connection with the church of Euphemia in the Olybrios district of Constantinople, which she founded and her daughter and granddaughter embellished, also may justify the image makers’ use of her coins as prototypes. As will be explored below, Irene restored the relics and another church of St. Euphemia, suggesting that

28 Grierson-Mays, *LRC*, 244, suggest that she returned to Constantinople shortly after 460, where she died before 493.
she may have consciously emulated the association of Licinia and her female offspring with this particular saint.

The coins of Irene’s regency depart radically from established tradition, given that no effigies of empresses appeared on coins in the preceding century and a half. Their imagery, which combines numismatic iconography of the fifth and eighth centuries, promotes Irene’s role in imperial succession.

**Gold Coins of Irene’s Sole Reign (797–802)**

During her sole reign Irene issued solidi and *folles* in Constantinople (Figs. 1–2).\(^{30}\) Both sides of the solidi depict her with a schematic frontal bust. *Folles* and seals carry identical representations.\(^{31}\) The iconography established for her effigy during the regency is retained with minor modifications. She holds the globe and the cross scepter and wears the *loros*; her crown is decorated with a central cross, but instead of four pinnacles it is now flanked by two. The legend on both sides reads “EIRInH bASILISSH” (“Irene empress”), differing from the orthography and title used on earlier coins, where her name is spelled inconsistently and she is titled *augusta* and mother of the emperor.\(^{32}\) Irene’s coins introduced subtle changes that conveyed nuanced messages when viewed within the broader context of eighth-century imagery and ideology. The following discussion explores the salient features of Irene’s independent coinage to offer a new reading of her numismatic imagery.

**The Imperial Portrait and Its Duplication**

The coins of Irene’s sole reign diverge from certain aspects of earlier Isaurian numismatic iconography. Isaurian gold coins portray a single emperor on the obverse and the cross on steps on the reverse, or depict two or sometimes as many as five male imperial figures (all of different generations) on the two sides of the coin (Figs. 10–11).\(^{33}\) For instance, a solidus of Irene’s husband, Leo IV, shows the emperor and their son on the obverse and Leo’s deceased father and grandfather on the reverse; the legends emphasize the dynastic

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\(^{30}\) **DOC** 3.1.347–51; she also minted solidi in Syracuse.

\(^{31}\) The reverse of the *follis* shows the traditional M flanked by XXX and NNN, see **DOC** 3.1.68, 190, 347, 350. For lead seals and a lead token, see Zacos-Veglery, *Byzantine Lead Seals* 1.38–39, no. 355–57, and **DOSeals**, 1.162, no. 71.20.

\(^{32}\) **DOC** 3.1.338–42, 349; Füeg, “Solidusausgaben,” 50. For epigraphy of eighth-century coins, see **DOC** 3.1.183–89. Class I of her Syracusan solidi, however, used the title *augusta* in this period; see ibid., 350.

\(^{33}\) See **DOC** 3.1.9, 241–42; Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness, On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton/Oxford, 2002), 88–89.
relationships: “Leo son and grandson, Constantine junior,” and “grandfather Leo, father Constantine” (Fig. 10). Irene, however, broke with these iconographic traditions: instead of aligning her image with those of the cross on steps or ancestors, her effigy appeared on both sides. The duplication of her image created meaning not only through the repetition of the portrait but also through the displacement of traditional types.

The avoidance of the cross on steps underscored Irene’s distinction from her immediate predecessors. This motif, introduced into coin iconography in the late sixth century, was consistently associated with the legend “VICTORIA AVGVSTORVM,” and after 720 with the Greek legend “IC XC NIKA.” Although the cross on steps originally served as an imperial victory symbol, during the eighth century it acquired iconoclastic connotations, because the cross was the only visual symbol promoted in religious images by iconoclast patrons. This development likely contributed to the avoidance of the cross on steps on Irene’s coinage, even though it was employed during her regency on the miliaresion.

The repetition of the same imperial type on both sides of a coin was unprecedented on Byzantine coinage before Irene. The double portrait accentuated the absence of imperial colleagues on her coins. Not being blood descendant of the Isaurian line, Irene lacked an imperial predecessor with whom she could be associated, and portraits of her son or husband on her coins would have recalled the bloody circumstances under which she took office, effectively terminating the Isaurian Dynasty. Irene, therefore, appeared as an independent figure with no connection to the iconoclastic dynasty that preceded her. Nonetheless, her new visual device may be linked with Isaurian numismatic imagery. The gold coins of her father-in-law, Constantine V, minted in 741–751, show identical figures on the two sides, yet the indistinguishable busts represent two different emperors, Constantine V and his father, Leo III (Fig. 13). This issue could have inspired the pictorial formula of repetition because Irene and her advisers had been likely familiar with it. Yet, the concept for the duplication of the imperial type could have also been

35 DOC 2.1.95–99, 102; Barber, Figure and Likeness, 88–89. After 720, when the cross on steps was introduced into the miliaresion, it was only used occasionally on gold coins; see DOC 3.1.182, 231, 286, 317–18, 322–23.
36 Barber, Figure and Likeness, 83–105, with bibliography.
37 DOC 3.1.342–44, pl. XIV.4a1–4b9.
38 Some later emperors followed this practice, see DOC 3.1.367, 375, 394.
39 DOC 3.1.292–93, 299–300, pl. VIII.1b-1g4.
derived from coins of Licinia Eudoxia issued in 439, which portray her in a bust and a full figure portrait on the obverse and reverse, respectively (Fig. 7), suggesting the repetition of the imperial image.

The duplication of Irene’s portrait may also reflect a different visual tradition. The repetition of an image within the same context was used to reinforce its message and magical efficacy in the pre-iconoclastic period.40 Similarly, Irene’s repeated portrait amplified the message of her image through a highly effective visual device, which ensured that her portrait did not escape notice and presented her position as inevitable.

Irene’s double portrait on the solidi offered a radical new representation of the empress. Her coins evoked the appearance of eighth-century coins emblazoned with imperial busts, corresponding compositionally and stylistically with Isaurian numismatic tradition. Yet, the repeated portraits also harnessed the power of late antique protective imagery and evoked coins of Licinia Eudoxia. Moreover, through the displacement of traditional Isaurian types, Irene’s solidi broke with the numismatic iconography of iconoclastic emperors. The doubling of her effigy activated the viewer’s attention by its sheer unexpectedness, which, in turn, facilitated the reception of its message. The intended message of the double portraits, which present the empress both as a ruler and a personification of peace, becomes clearer when considered together with the accompanying legends.

Irene’s Name

The name was a crucial element of one’s identity in Byzantium and the development of the theory of images during the iconoclastic controversy crystalized the practice of consistently naming holy figures in representations to establish their clear identities. The name was perceived as a fundamental component of both image and prototype as stated in the Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea. Maguire has observed, “accuracy and specificity” rather than “obscurity and ambiguity” facilitated the proper operation of icons in the post-iconoclastic era. The coins of Irene’s sole reign demonstrate a similar approach: her portrait is rendered with great clarity and the spelling of her name is standardized.

During the regency, Irene’s name was spelled variously on coins as IRInI, IRInH, IRHnI, HRnI, or HbHnI (Fig. 12). Throughout her sole reign, however, it was consistently spelled as IRInH on the coins (Figs. 1–2). This spelling is more consistent with the orthography of her name used in other documents and closely approximates the standard spelling of the Greek noun IRHNH (peace).

The word eirēnē has varied meanings in Byzantine culture. Since Roman times, imperial ideology established the emperor as the safeguard and creator of peace. Moreover, the broad concept of peace ranged from communion with God to the absence of war within the Church. The interweaving of
the peace of the Church through Christ and the peace of the state through the emperor was enshrined in imperial ceremonials, church liturgy, as well as the actual building of the Church of Hagia Irene, which was patronized by Constantine the Great and Justinian in the heart of the city and played a central role in its life. These multifaceted connotations of the word *eirēnē* were deeply ingrained in Byzantine thought. The standardization of Irene’s name on the coinage of her sole reign could hardly go unobserved, as it literally linked the empress with a cardinal imperial and religious ideal, thereby presenting her likeness as a visual portrait of the concept of Peace.

The word “peace” is an uncommon inscription on Byzantine coins, but it has precedents in the use of the Latin term “PAX” on some seventh- and early eighth-century issues. They include the well-known pre-iconoclastic solidi of the second reign of Justinian II (705–711), where the *globus cruciger* prominently inscribed with the word “PAX” underscores the emperor’s restoration to power and his role as guardian of peace (Fig. 14). The obverses of these coins show the bust of Christ demonstrating Justinian’s iconophile stance, which was also confirmed by the important Canon 82 of the Council of Trullo, which he convoked in 692. This canon declared the desirability of representing Christ in human form in images, and was subsequently quoted during the proceedings of the Council of Nicaea convened by Irene, as an argument in defense of images of Christ. Irene and her advisers probably recognized in Justinian II a worthy predecessor and staunch supporter of iconophile orthodoxy and peace in Christ. It is possible that the word “PAX” inscribed on Justinian’s solidi inspired the new spelling of Irene’s name on her coins to highlight her pivotal role in restoring peace in the church and the empire.

49 “PAX” appeared on copper coins issued in 337 with an image of the deceased Helena, and on the coinage of Anthemius (467–472), but it was absent from coins in 491–602; see Grierson-Mays, *LRC*, 255–256, pl.35.903–908; Brubaker-Tobler, “The Gender of Money,” 577–78. In the seventh century, “PAX” was inscribed on the silver coins of Constans II in Carthage in 647 and the copper coins of the first reign of Justinian II from Carthage and Sardinia; see *DOC* 2.2.475, 572, 588–89, 591–92.
50 Ibid, 644–49.
Eirēnē was an auspicious name for an empress who was perceived as the restorer of peace. It may well be that the primary meaning Irene’s image makers associated with eirēnē was the reinstatement of orthodoxy and the defeat of iconoclasm at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. Irene and her son convoked the council, participated in its first and last sessions, and signed the acts that changed religious policy. It is, however, safe to assume that the empress rather than Constantine (who was only 16 years old) was the instigator of the new policy, which served as a tool of legitimization for her authority. The location at Nicaea had both practical and ideological importance. After a failed attempt to hold the council in Constantinople the previous year, Nicaea offered an uncontroversial location away from the capital at the same time that it suggested association with the First Council of Nicaea convoked by Constantine the Great in 325, further justifying Irene’s authority. This connection was enunciated in the conciliar canons, where the empress and her son are praised as “New Constantine” and “New Helena.” Following the restoration of images, Irene was presented as the founder of peace. The meaning of Irene’s name was exploited in iconophile texts, which equate the defeat of iconoclasm with the establishment of peace.

Fig. 14: Solidus of Justinian II (705), obverse: bust of Christ, reverse: bust of Justinian II with globus cruciger inscribed with PAX (Photo: Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Bequest of Thomas Whittemore, 1951.31.4.1034, Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College).

53 Irene was not the only force behind the Second Council of Nicaea, yet she was instrumental to its success. See Theoph. Chron. AM 6276–80, 630–37.
54 Noted by Herrin, Women in Purple, 87–89; Treadgold, Byzantine Revival, 82–83. For the failed council of 786, see ibid., 79–82; Theoph. Chron. AM 6278, 635.
56 Noted by Speck, Kaiser Konstantin VI, 1.106–8.
for example, describes the reinstatement of iconophile orthodoxy as follows: “And so God’s Church found peace (εἰρήνευσεν), even though the enemy does not cease from sowing his tares among his own workmen; but God’s Church when she is under attack always proves victorious.” The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea include verbal puns on “peace” and Irene’s name: acclamations extol Irene and her son as “peacemaking emperors,” and the letter concluding the council praises her for defeating the iconoclastic heresy, stamping out strife, and establishing unity and harmony within the empire and the Church, in accordance with her name. Theodore Studite addresses the empress as “Irene of the divine name” in his letter of 801, while in a missive of 817 he names her as “peace-named” and “peace-bringer.” The Life of Patriarch Nikephoros by Ignatios the Deacon (dated 843–846) also exploits the meaning of Irene’s name:

Then [Irene], whose name means “peace,” together with her son Constantine, received the imperial scepter that is conferred from God as an inheritance from Constantine’s father. . . . She was God’s instrument in His love and pity for mankind, reconciling into orthodoxy the perversity and dissension that insinuated itself like a serpent into the Church at that time.

The Life of Theophanes Confessor (dated before 832) written by Patriarch Methodios provides perhaps the most elaborate literary flourish based on Irene’s name as it narrates how her ascent to power engendered universal peace. The author presents peace as proper obedience to God and orthodox dogma, and portrays Irene as its founder and safeguard. Peace is characterized as a dancing, singing, and beautifully dressed maiden bestowing a multitude of benefits (e.g., bounty, harmony, regeneration, and rebuilding) to folk in all walks of life. The 58-line text mentions the empress’ name seven times and uses eirēnē or its derivations about eighty times as it extolls her accomplishments.

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57 Theophanes, Chronographia, ed. Classen, 1.717.15–17; Theoph. Chron. AM 6280, 637.
58 Εἰρήνοποιω̃ν βασιλέων, Mansi 13.201E, 416E. Also see, Mansi 12.1086D.
60 Επιστ. 7: “Ει̉ρήνη θεο̉νύματε” (in some versions θεώνυμε); Επιστ. 175: “ἐν ἡμέραις βασιλείας ει̉ρηνωνύμου καὶ ει̉ρηνοδώρου ὡς συνδραμει̉ν φερονύμως τοὺς ονόμασι τὰ πράγματα;” see Fatouros, Theodori Studitae epistolae 1.2.26.83, and 2.296.18–19; for synopses and dates, see ibid., 1.1.149*-150*, 264*.
61 Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints’ Lives in English Translation (Washington, 1998), 48–49; for dating, see ibid., 33; PG 100.52C.
63 Speck notes that it is sometimes unclear whether the text refers to the empress or peace; see Speck, Kaiser Konstantin VI, 2.497 n.29.
Therefore, Irene’s effigy on her solidi operated both as a portrait and a personification of her paramount accomplishment and this meaning was conveyed by the changed spelling and standardization of her name. Byzantine visual and textual rhetoric had traditionally presented empresses as personifications of abstract ideas. For example, Constantinian and Theodosian coins linked empresses with personifications of imperial virtues, tacitly suggesting identification between them.64 Similarly, Corippus praised Sophia as the embodiment of imperial wisdom.65 Irene’s solidi engaged this tradition and presented the empress as both a figure of authority and a personification of Peace. By invoking the inscription “PAX” on coins of Justinian II, a supporter of icons, and by reminding viewers of her defeat of iconoclasm, her coins also offered a subtle iconophile reference.

The Basilissa Title
Irene selected a new title, basilissa, for the coins of her sole reign to emphasize her new position; it was used consistently and without variation on her coins and seals. Varied titles designated Irene during the regency: despunēs (a version of despoina) in the mosaic inscription in St. Sophia in Thessaloniki, augusta and augusta mitēr on the solidi, while on silver coins basileis named her and Constantine VI as co-rulers.66 The plural title basileis was introduced into silver coinage to designate co-emperors in the early eighth century by Leo III, reflecting the more widespread use of basileus in official titulature as of 629.67 Significantly, basileus was used for the first time to name a single ruler on Byzantine gold coins during Irene’s regency, where Constantine was given this title in abbreviated form.68 Basilissa was the most frequently employed title in textual sources describing Irene’s sole reign, yet she also employed the male title basileus in her legislation in this period, and Theodore Studite’s letter of 801 addressed the empress as despoina.69 Although various titles were used for Irene during her sole reign, official imagery consistently promoted

64 James, Empress and Power, 108–9; Angelova, “Ivories of Ariadne.”
67 DOC 3.1.177–79.
68 DOC 3.1.338, 341.
69 For a list of the use of the basilissa title during Irene’s reign, see Bensamar, “La titulature de l’impératrice,” 250. Theophanes uses basilissa most frequently when designating Irene both during her regency and sole reign, see Theophanes, Chronographia, ed. Classen, 1.706.7, 707.13, 708.5, 709.9, 713.18, 720.2, 733.5, 734.16, 735.1, 735.7. For Irene’s use of basileus, see Zepos, Jus Graecoromanum 1.45, 49; For despoina, see Epist. 7, Fatouros, Theodori Studitae epistulae 1.2.24–27.
the title basilissa. It is likely that basilissa emphasized Irene’s independent rule because its meaning was less restrictively defined than that of augusta, which circumscribed the position of the empress as closely dependent upon the emperor.70 The Latin title, augusta remained the primary title of empresses in ceremonials, legal documents, and chronicles in this period, indicating that the basilissa title was not simply its translation but rather a term with a different set of associations.71 For example, the Book of Ceremonies uses almost without exception the title augusta in reporting the acclamations celebrating the coronation of the dependent empress.72 Basilissa also commonly designated imperial wives in literary sources and a connection may be observed between the description of an empress’ charitable works and the use of the title basilissa in eighth-to-tenth-century texts.73

In light of the use of the various female imperial titles in the period and the development of the employment of the male title basileus, it appears that basilissa articulated a change in Irene’s position from regent mother to reigning empress; it signaled that Irene supplanted her son, the emperor (basileus), completely. It is possible that the association with benevolence and charity also underpinned Irene’s choice of the title basilissa during her sole reign, for philanthropy was a cornerstone of her policy. Irene imbued this traditional title with her particular message; it underscored the complete transfer of power from son to mother and presented her as a philanthropic ruler, yet it did so with the help of a widely used title customarily applied to imperial wives.

The Imperial Insignia

An examination of the insignia illuminates further aspects of the intended messages of Irene’s numismatic portraits. The crown, an essential component of the imperial regalia, played an important part in ceremonials.74 The Book


71 Bensammar, “La titulature de l’impératrice.”

72 Chapters 39 and 40 (tenth century), which describe the nuptial coronation of an emperor and the coronation of an empress, use the term augusta, although on one occasion ch. 40 also employs basilissa. Chapter 41, which relates the coronation and wedding of Irene in 768, only uses the term augusta to designate the empress. See Albert Vogt, Le Livre des Cérémonies (Paris, 1935), 2.48(39), 49(40), 50(41), 6–23; De ceremoniis, 1.196–216.

73 Bensammar, “La titulature de l’impératrice,” 271–72, 281–84; for example, the Life of Theodora (dated 867–912) reports, “To show her generosity, the empire (basilissa) gave fifteen pounds of gold to the patriarch, fifty pounds to the senate, and fifteen pounds to the clergy” following her coronation; see Talbot, Byzantine Defenders of Images, 366; A. Markopoulos, “Bios tes Autokrateiras Theodoras (BHG 1731),” Symmeikta 5 (1983), 249–285, at 260.58–60.

74 Klaus Wessel, Marcell Restle, eds., Realexikon zur Byzantinischen Kunst (Stuttgart, 1978), 3.455–70; Ball, Byzantine Dress, 13; DOC 2.1.80–84; DOC 3.1.127–30.
of Ceremonies describes the coronation of the empress demonstrating the use of the crown and other insignia during this ceremonial. Chapter 41 narrates the wedding and coronation of Irene held in 768, and chapter 40 recounts the coronation of the wife or daughter of an emperor from the tenth century. The same chapter also relates that the empress, originally dressed in the maphorion, was invested by the emperor with symbols of power, namely the chlamys, crown, and prependulia (hanging attachments of the crown) after the patriarch performed prayers over them. Her change of garment and the receipt of the crown and prependulia marked her transition from ordinary woman to sacred imperial being. Following the coronation, the factions praised the empress as an elect of God; the coronation ceremonial articulated her exceptional position and divinely endowed authority.

Irene’s schematically rendered crown on the coinage is decorated with a cross, two pinnacles, and double prependulia, similar to crowns shown on Licinia Eudoxia’s Italian coins (Figs. 1, 7–8), suggesting that Irene’s crown design was inspired by these numismatic effigies. From 642 to the mid-tenth century, crowns of emperors represented on coins do not show prependulia; therefore, during Irene’s reign the attachments were an exclusively female attribute, at least on the coinage.

Irene holds a conspicuous globus cruciger, a traditional symbol of Christian imperial dominion (Fig. 1). Although Parani proposed that the globus cruciger on middle Byzantine coins was “conventional and did not have a specific symbolic connotation,” visual and textual evidence suggests that it was in fact a meaningful symbol. Irene was stripped of this attribute in her numismatic portraits following her expulsion from the palace in 790, demonstrating that its presence or absence signaled the balance of power between Irene and her son. Moreover, the highly prominent equestrian statue of Justinian near Hagia Sophia showed the emperor holding an orb topped by a cross. Procopius

76 ODB 1.596; Tsirpanlis, “The Imperial Coronation,” 71–73. However, for dating ch. 41 to 933–934, see Georg Ostrogorsky, Ernst Stein, “Die Krönungsordnungen des Zeremonienbuches. Chronologische und verfassungsgeschichtliche Bemerkungen,” Byzantion 7 (1932), 185–233, at 214.
78 See DOC 2.1.84–86; DOC 3.1.131–33; Angelova, “Ivories of Ariadne,” 4–5; James, Empresses and Power, 140–141; Reallexikon zur Byzantinischen Kunst 3:403–8, 469–71.
79 Parani, Reconstructing the Reality of Images, 34.
explains its significance: “In his left hand he holds a globe, by which the sculptor has signified that the whole earth and sea were subject to him, yet he carries neither sword nor spear nor any other weapon, but a cross surmounts his globe, by virtue of which alone he has won the kingship and victory in war.” This interpretation was likely known in the eighth century, as later historians drew on Procopius’ work extensively. The statue was still present in middle Byzantine Constantinople, and the Patria attests that the globus cruciger held in its hand expressed imperial majesty founded on Christian belief. The globus cruciger also was associated with female authority in early Byzantine images; it appears on coin representations of Licinia Eudoxia (Figs. 7–8) and Martina and on the ivory panels of an unidentified empress. Therefore, the globus cruciger was a widely understood symbol appropriate to communicate Christian universal dominion as well as female authority. Moreover, it reiterated Irene’s firm hold on power in light of the history of the power struggle between herself and her son, when she temporarily lost the right to carry this attribute during the regency.

Irene holds the cross scepter in her left hand. The scepter as a symbol of authority was derived from the insignia of Roman consuls. Consuls were depicted consistently wearing the trabea and holding a scepter on ivory diptychs of the fifth and sixth centuries. Nonetheless, scepters were shown infrequently on Byzantine coins until the late eighth century. The cross scepter, not employed on Isaurian coins, was re-introduced into numismatic iconography by Constantine VI and Irene. Scepters were, however, not only attributes of imperial figures but also of attendants guarding the emperor. Yet, ample evidence suggests that scepters were closely associated with imperial authority. In early Byzantium the scepter was seen as a highly symbolic object that could denote the possession of imperial power. Several empresses on early Byzantine coins hold the cross scepter, including Licinia Eudoxia, Sophia,

81 Procopius, De aedificiis, I.2, 11–12; translated in Mango, Sources and Documents, 111.
82 Patria II 17, Preger, Scriptores, 159; Berger, Untersuchungen, 238; for the impact of Procopius’s description of Justinian’s statue on later writers, see ibid., 239.
83 For Martina’s coins, see DOC 2.1.288, 292; for the ivory panels, see Angelova, “Ivories of Ariadne.”
85 Kurt Weitzmann, ed., The Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century (New York, 1977), 46–54. Tiberius II (578–582) also was shown in consular robes and holding a scepter on his solidi of 578, DOC 1.266.
86 DOC 3.1.138–40; Parani, Reconstructing the Reality of Images, 31–33.
88 Angelova, “Ivories of Ariadne,” 4. Also see James, Empresses and Power, 140.
Constantia, and Leontia. The scepter was deeply connected with imperial authority according to textual sources. The *Life of Nikephoros*, quoted above, describes the transmission of power to Irene and Constantine VI with an image of the bestowal of the scepter. The *Book of Ceremonies* describes the cruciform scepter and the loros garment as significant components of the imperial regalia at Easter, and portrays the emperor’s authority through the image of possessing the scepter. This evidence shows that the scepter, often associated with the loros in the middle Byzantine period, was an effective symbol of imperial power. Moreover, the scepter also suggested consular associations on Irene’s coinage, an idea also conveyed by her wearing of the loros. These attributes linked Irene to the long and prestigious tradition of Roman government as well as to consular benevolence, as explored further below.

The careful depiction of the imperial insignia on Irene’s coins contributes to a traditional, pious, and highly authoritative image of the empress. The *globus cruciger* and cross scepter were important and well-established symbols of Christian imperial dominion and communicated Irene’s position as a pious sovereign in the strongest terms possible. Her crown with *prependulia* also emphasized Irene’s female gender and its use along with the cross scepter set the empress apart from her iconoclastic predecessors.

**The Imperial Dress**

Irene appears in the loros both on the coins of her regency and sole reign. The loros was a privilege of the imperial office derived from the garb of the Roman consul, the *trabea*, worn during military triumphs and consular processions. Between 717 and 811, however, the reigning senior emperor did not normally wear the loros in numismatic representations. The solidi of Leo IV exemplify how Isaurian rulers employed imperial garments (Figs. 10–11). They represent the emperor and his son in *chlamydes* on the obverses and their deceased ancestors in *loroi* on the reverses—the loros distinguishes the

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89 *RIC* 10.165, 169, pl. 49.2016, 2023, 51.2046; *DOC* 1, pls. L-LVII, LXX.71.1–2, LXXX; *DOC* 2.1, pl. II-V.
90 *Byzantine Defenders of Images*, 48. Also see *Life of Ioannikos* (846–47) by Peter, ibid, 267.
93 Exceptions are some Italian coins of Leo III, Constantine V, and Nicephorus; see *DOC*, 3.1.269–270, 315–6, 322, 359–360, pls. V.56–57, X.23, XV.9–10.2, XVII.10.5. No loros is found on representations of reigning male emperors on imperial seals and seals of officials between 717 and 802, see Zacos-Veglery, *Byzantine Lead Seals*. 
deceased forebears from the living rulers. The coins of Irene’s regency changed this practice: now Irene, reigning regent mother wore the loros, whereas Constantine VI and his ancestors wore chlamydes (Figs.3–4). Here, the loros articulated Irene’s secondary status, real or nominal, while still affirming her rights in the imperial hierarchy as regent mother. The loros along with the prependulia emphasized a distinction in gender and focused attention on the empress, while the chlamydes aligned Constantine VI and his forefathers and highlighted their blood ties. The second issue of the regency renders the empress and her son in the same garments, although the ancestors are no longer present (Fig. 12).

**The Loros and Iconophile Policy**

The coins of Irene’s reign retained the portrait created for her during the regency, emphasizing continuity with established tradition (Fig. 1). The loros dissociated her from her iconoclastic predecessors who never appeared in this garment during their reigns, while it also associated her with the pre-iconoclastic coinage of Justinian II who frequently donned it. The predecessor of the loros, the consular trabea was rarely used on coins in the sixth and seventh centuries, and it was absent from numismatic iconography from 610 to 692 in Constantinople. Justinian II was the first emperor represented in the loros. This is noteworthy, because the loros appears on his gold issue of 692 that inaugurates another numismatic novelty, the image of Christ (Fig. 15). The loros may convey the emperor’s subordination to Christ, clearly stated in the legends: Christ is “REX REGNANTIUM,” whereas the emperor is “SERVUS CHRISTI.” The loros was closely associated with Christ by the tenth century; at Easter the emperor and twelve officials appeared in loroi to represent Christ and his apostles. The loros signified the resurrection and evoked the burial shroud of Christ. It is not certain, whether these notions had existed in the late seventh or late eighth centuries. It is unclear when the Christianized meaning of the loros developed, although it was known by 899,

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94 The loros is used once for a junior emperor in the eighth century, but was employed more often for junior emperors in the ninth century see, DOC, 3.1.283–89, 363–70, 387–404, pls. VII.3b, XVII.1a1–2, XX.2b-XXI.11. Leo V reintroduced the loros-clad image of the reigning emperor in 813, see ibid, 375, pl. XVIII.

95 Ball, *Byzantine Dress*, 22.


97 DOC 2.2.570; Breckenridge, *Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II*, 63–68.

98 De ceremoniis 2.40.637–38. ODB 1.595–97, dates this chapter to the mid-tenth century.

as the Kletorologion attests; the consular feast probably acquired Christian meanings through its movement from 1 January to Easter in the eighth century.\(^9\) This at least allows the possibility that the loros already had Christian meanings in Irene’s reign or possibly earlier. The pairing of the loros-clad emperor with an effigy of Christ conveyed Justinian’s iconophile views and divinely sanctioned authority. Considering the possible connections between the use of the loros and the image of Christ on Justinian’s coins and the avoidance of the loros by reigning iconoclastic emperors, it is plausible to conclude that Irene’s image makers employed this garment because it had iconophile connotations.

The Loros, Philanthropy, and Orthodoxy

Because of its consular origin, the loros could have also conveyed another aspect of Irene’s imperial persona, philanthropy. Consulship in the Late Roman Empire was associated with munificence, as consuls were responsible for financing feasts and public games.\(^{10}\) The Book of Ceremonies mentions that the loros originated in the consul’s dress and alluded to the ruler’s obligations in governance, suggesting that its consular origin was understood in the eighth century.\(^{11}\) Irene’s largess (hypateia) during the Easter procession

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\(^9\) Hendy, Coinage, 154–55; also see Breckenridge, Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II, 42–45. For the Kletorologion, see N. Oikonomides, Listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles (Paris, 1972), 201.

\(^{10}\) Roger Bagnall, et al., Consuls of the Later Roman Empire (Atlanta, 1987); Oikonomides, Les listes de préséance, 296.

\(^{11}\) De ceremoniis, 2.40.637–639; Breckenridge, Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II, 36–37.
of 799 recorded by Theophanes may indicate that the consular procession was still celebrated at this time. The loros was still associated with imperial munificence in the tenth century, for the emperor distributed largess at Easter and Pentecost clad in the loros. Perhaps Irene’s preference for the loros highlights philanthropy as a pivotal virtue of her imperial persona.

Other evidence also suggests that philanthropy was essential for Irene’s policy. Philanthropy was a central imperial virtue molded after the Hellenistic theory of kingship; numerous early Byzantine empresses patronized philanthropic institutions and Irene likely drew upon their example. For instance, Theophanes highlights Pulcheria’s benevolence: “She . . . left all her possessions to the poor. . . . She herself had founded numerous houses of prayer, poor-houses, hostels for travelers, and burial places for strangers. . . .” Irene’s philanthropic record is similar: she founded homes and kitchens for the elderly and the poor, hostels for travelers and the sick, a cemetery for the poor, and established a public bakery near her palace in the Eleutherios district. She also canceled taxes and provided tax exemptions to orphanages, hostels, elder homes, churches, and imperial monasteries.

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102 Ibid., 43–45. Scholars suggested that the consular feast was moved in the eighth century from 1 January to Easter: see J. Ebersolt, Mélanges d’Histoire et d’Archéologie Byzantines (Paris, 1917), 65; Galavaris, “Symbolism of the Imperial Costume,” 107. For the view that hypateia had no consular connotations and designated imperial largess in a general sense by the eighth century, see R. Guillard, “Le Consul,” Byzantion XXIV (1954), 548–78 (reprinted in Idem, Recherches sur les institutions byzantines [Amsterdam, 1967] II.44–67, at 45, 61 n.18). For the view that hypateia denoted years of independent rule in the late seventh through the ninth centuries, see E. Stein, “Post-consulat et autokratoria,” Annaire de l’Institut de philologie et d’histoire orientales, Mélanges Bidez II (1933–34), 869–912, at 898–902.


104 For similar conclusions, see Ball, Byzantine Dress, 17–18. I thank Jennifer Ball for sharing references with me.


106 Theoph. Chron. AM 5945, 164.


thanked Irene and applauded her philanthropic measures that alleviated the crippling tax burden in a letter.109

Irene’s philanthropy also manifested in her building and restoration projects, another well-established female imperial role since the early Byzantine period.110 Irene’s architectural patronage was more ample than that of most rulers of the late seventh and eighth centuries, demonstrating a commitment to public welfare.111 She is credited with the rebuilding of Beroia in Thrace, renamed as Eirenoupolis evoking the illustrious example of the foundation of Constantinople.112 Irene is described as the patron of the monastery of St. Euphrosyne ta Libadia, and the churches of Sts. Anastasios (with Constantine VI), Luke, and Eustathios in Constantinople, and the convent on the Princes’ Island.113 Her restoration of churches, images, and relics is also applauded.114 Of particular interest are the rediscovery of St. Euphemia’s relics and the refurbishment of her church because these actions show sustained attempts at presenting Irene as a philanthropic and orthodox ruler.115

Euphemia was the patron saint of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and was seen as an embodiment of true orthodoxy.116 Her relics, located in her Chalcedonian church before their translation to Constantinople in the seventh
century, were credited with authenticating the final definition of faith at the council. In the definition of faith the presiding imperial couple, Marcian and Pulcheria, were praised as New Constantine and New Helena and as “luminaries of orthodoxy” and “luminaries of peace.” Pulcheria was clearly perceived as a creator of harmony and peace within the church. Pulcheria’s orthodoxy, leadership in convoking the council, and her comparison to Helena furnished a suitable imperial female prototype, although Irene’s imitation of Pulcheria was not articulated in surviving texts of the period. Yet, it is likely that contemporaries familiar with imperial and ecclesiastical history would have recognized Irene’s emulation of Pulcheria. By the tenth century the commemorations of Irene and Pulcheria were intertwined, strengthening the possibility that Irene’s imitation of Pulcheria was understood by her contemporaries. The restoration of Euphemia’s relics and church allied Irene with a powerful female saint who produced healing miracles and safeguarded orthodoxy, while also affiliated her with the venerable Pulcheria, carefully weaving together main threads of her imperial ideology, namely philanthropy, peace-making, and orthodoxy. Therefore, it is conceivable that the loros on Irene’s coins alluded to both philanthropy and iconophile orthodoxy.

Garments of Empresses

The significance of Irene’s use of the loros is heightened when we consider that its precursor, the trabea, was rarely worn by empresses in surviving early Byzantine images. The only empress shown in the trabea on coins before Irene was Licinia Eudoxia (Fig. 8). Although empresses did not appear in the trabea often, it was used on occasion for representations of personifications and the Virgin. The most frequently represented garment of empresses on coins and

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118 Acts of the Council of Chalcedon, 2.240. Also see ibid., 240–43; Kent Holum, Theodosian Empresses, Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1982), 213–16.


in other media (e.g. the ivories representing an unidentified empress) from 383 to 641 was the *chlamys*¹²² (Figs. 6–7, 9). Originally a military garment, the purple *chlamys* was one of the most recognizable visual symbols of imperial power, as both emperors and empresses were vested with this cloak during their coronations.¹²³ The *chlamys* became particularly popular in representations of Theodosian empresses, creating assimilation between the figures of the emperor and the empress, and visualizing the notion of partnership in imperial power.¹²⁴ Another garment, the *palla*, is worn by empresses on steelyard weights and a marble statuette.¹²⁵ Although early Byzantine empresses wore various garments according to the visual record, their most frequently represented vestment was the *chlamys*. It is impossible to know what garments were favored by empresses from 641 to 780, because there are no securely identified surviving representations of imperial women in this period. Chapter 41 of the *Book of Ceremonies* provides meager evidence for eighth-century practice: it indicates that the would-be empress wore an imperial tunic and a *maphorion* before her coronation and that during the coronation ritual her *maphorion* was replaced with the *chlamys*.¹²⁶

Irene’s selection of the *loros* appears highly significant against this background. Its relatively rare use in the preceding period may have recommended it for Irene’s coinage. The *loros* was clearly associated with the exercise of imperial authority and consular philanthropy, and on occasion empresses or female personifications donned it. Yet, it was not the customary garment associated with imperial wives. The selection of a well-established but infrequently used garment appropriate both for rulers and personifications allowed Irene’s image makers to project specific meanings onto the *loros*, such as her iconophile affiliation, philanthropic policy, and peace-making regime. Her image taps into tradition by reviving the pre-iconoclastic visual prototypes of Licinia Eudoxia, Justinian II, and female personifications and thereby distancing her from her iconoclast predecessors.

**Conclusion**

While most aspects of Irene’s numismatic iconography were already established on the coins of the regency, the messages associated with her portraits

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came into their full capacity during her sole reign, when her image was shown with greater clarity and was associated with new legends. Irene’s solidi visualized her newly acquired authority and presented her as a philanthropic, orthodox, and iconophile ruler who also guaranteed and embodied religious peace. The imagery on her solidi refrained from direct visual references to iconophile policy. Clearly, Irene’s representations merged tradition and innovation carefully. Her images acknowledged her connections with her Isaurian male predecessors yet also strategically distanced her from them in order to enunciate clearly the legitimacy of her independent rule founded upon a return to iconophile orthodoxy. The restoration of orthodoxy was undoubtedly Irene’s greatest accomplishment, as textual sources regularly attest to her presence in Byzantine collective memory as a champion of orthodoxy, and subtle references to this achievement may be also found on her coinage.

Irene’s coin images provide a link between the last portraits of late antique empresses and the next extant representations of middle Byzantine empresses; her representations are therefore pivotal for understanding the development of the official imagery of empresses from the seventh through the ninth centuries. The employment of the loros for empresses, which became their garment of choice in the middle Byzantine period, may have originated with Irene, and her coin effigies clearly served as prototypes for numismatic portraits of empresses of the ninth and tenth centuries. While scholars emphasize the strong ideological connections between different generations of imperial women in forging their political and visual identity, in the case of Irene, it is noteworthy that her prototypes include not only imperial women but also male imperial predecessors and a female saint. She is presented as a ruler firmly ensconced in the tradition of Byzantine orthodoxy and rulership. Although the Byzantine mentality was usually unforgiving of women transgressing traditional gender roles, Irene’s defeat of iconoclasm provided a discourse in which her non-traditional behavior could be viewed in a positive light. Consequently, she is described in a ninth-century text as a woman shattering the very definition of Byzantine womanhood: “Irene was a mere woman, but she possessed both the love of God and firmness of understanding, if it is right to give the name woman to one who surpassed even men in the piety of her understanding. . . .”

127 DOC 3.1.461–63, DOC 3.2.490, 541–42.
130 Life of Patriarch Nikephoros I, in Talbot, Byzantine Defenders of Images, 48. The praise of women through masculinization is a trope of Byzantine literature, see Paul Halsall, Women’s
female ruler indeed broke new ground, her official imagery presented her in a restrained visual image that upon first glance fits perfectly within eighth-century numismatic tradition, yet upon closer inspection reveals a plethora of subtle references that highlight both the traditional and innovative aspects of her sovereignty.131

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Bodies, Men’s Souls: Sanctity and Gender in Byzantium (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1999), 191–205.

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