

THE COMNENIAN PORTRAITS IN THE BARBERINI PSALTER

It is a rather surprising fact that the imperial portraits in the miniature on the recto of the first folio of the Vatican Psalter (Barb. gr. 372) have remained unidentified for so many years (Fig. 1). It is a full-page miniature in the upper half of which Christ as Pantocrator is enthroned in a half-mandorla. He holds a stemma, the imperial crown with jewelled pendants, in His right hand and extends it in the direction of the emperor below. In the lower register three royal personages,—a bearded emperor, a young beardless prince, and an empress,—wearing their crowns and their ceremonial costumes stand on low cushioned platforms. Above the head of each is the half figure of an angel touching with his right hand the crown of the person below him. The angel at the left touching the crown of the emperor points with his left hand to the Christ who extends the stemma towards the emperor as the symbol, presumably, of his divine authority. The angel touching the empress' crown balances the one at the left and holds a wand in his left hand. The young prince seems to be receiving special attention from heaven, for the angel touching his crown is flying down towards him directly from the throne of Christ. Both the emperor and the prince hold the labarum in their right hand, the emperor holding the mappa and the prince a jewel-studded book in the left hand. All three of the figures are nimbed. The concluding portion of a dedicatory poem runs around the four sides of the miniature, the order of the lines being indicated by the letters α , β , γ , δ .

The miniature, then, would seem to represent not only the glorification of an imperial family, but also to emphasize the coronation ceremony and particularly the ceremony in which the young prince was being associated as co-emperor with his father. This seems sufficiently clear from the central position of the prince, his stemma-crown (worn only by imperial personages), his regalia, and the special attention he is receiving from the angel. Furthermore in the Book of Ceremonies written by the emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the author, in describing the ceremony in which the young Leo was designated Caesar, states that the prince stood at the emperor's left.¹ In the Barberini miniature the prince also stands at the emperor's left. In the same Book of Ceremonies many of the details of the coronation-ceremonies of the emperor, the empress, and of the child born in the purple room are given. Among these details one finds the many acclamations with which the imperial personage was greeted by the people both during and after the coronation. Some of these acclamations were:

¹ Reiske, *Constantinus Porphyrogenitus*, I (Bonn, 1829), 432, in Niebuhr, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*.



Fig. 1. Rome. Bib. Vat. Barb. Gr. 372, Folio 1 Recto.
 Alexius Comnenus, John Comnenus, and the Empress Irene

— πολλοὶ ὑμῶν χρόνοι — τῶν σκήπτρων ἡ εὐτυχία
 — φυλάξει σε εἰς πλήθη χρόνων ἐν τῇ πορφύρᾳ
 — εἰς πολλοὺς καὶ ἀγαθοὺς χρόνους — ἀνάτειλον ἡ ἔνθεος βασιλεία.²

Very obviously the writer of the verses surrounding the Barberini miniature had these acclamations in mind when he composed his verses. They read:

οὗς ἡ τριφεγγὴς ἔνθεος μοναρχία
 πολλοῖς φυλάξει καὶ γαληνίοις χρόνοις
 εἰρηνικῇ τὲ καὶ σοφῇ καταστάσει
 διεξάγειν τὰ σκήπτρα τῆς ἐξουσίας.

The next problem, then, would be to identify the prince whose coronation was being commemorated in the miniature. Lambros³ in his study of the portraits of Byzantine emperors lists this imperial group among the “unknowns” set at the end of his plates. Grabar,⁴ strangely, cites it as an example of conscious anonymity: mais il reste significatif qu'on ait pu le copier en omettant les noms qui accompagnaient nécessairement les originaux et en transformant ainsi une groupe portraitique en une image typique du couronnement où toute allusion à une cérémonie concrète se trouve éliminée! But these names which Grabar believes to have been omitted, apparently because they do not appear on the miniature itself, most probably did appear on the verso of the preceding folio which has since been cut out and lost. This is clear from the fact that the dedicatory inscription which surrounds the miniature is not complete in itself but is the latter portion of a larger inscription begun on the preceding page. The first word, οὗς, of the inscription which remains makes this obvious and also shows that certain persons had been mentioned in the portion now lost.

It was Jerphanion⁵ who first suggested that the three people represented in the miniature might be Alexius I Comnenus, his wife the Empress Irene, and their young son John. That this suggestion is correct and that we have here an important imperial portrait-group commemorating the coronation of the young prince in 1092, as Jerphanion suggested and as I myself had concluded independently before becoming acquainted with Jerphanion's article, I shall attempt to demonstrate in the following observations.

It would be necessary to establish an approximate date for the manuscript before

² *Ibid.*, pp. 195, 196 (cf. 206), 192-193, 222.

³ S. P. Lambros, *Λεύκωμα Βυζαντινῶν Αυτοκρατόρων* (Athens, 1930), plate 97.

⁴ Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin* (Paris, 1936), p. 119 (the author confuses the date of this manuscript with another of the year 1177 in the Vatican Library).

⁵ G. de Jerphanion, “Le ‘Thorakion’ caractéristique iconographique du xi siècle,” in *Mélanges Charles Diehl* (Paris, 1930), p. 75.

an identification of the persons in the miniature could be attempted. The Barberini psalter is one of a group of seven known psalters⁶ with marginal illustrations. Its position in the sequence of the development of the whole group is quite certain. The iconography of its illustrations presupposes the existence of both the Chludoff psalter in Moscow and the Theodore psalter in London (Add. 19352). The style, however, and in many cases even the iconography, is so much closer to the latter of these two psalters that the Barberini manuscript is clearly not far removed in time from the Theodore psalter which bears the date of 1066. We might therefore readily assume a date in the latter quarter of the eleventh century or even in the early twelfth century for the Barberini psalter. That date is also indicated by the paleography.

Who, then, is the prince, and who the imperial couple? In the period between 1066, the date of the Theodore psalter, and the end of the eleventh century there is really but one possibility as to who these individuals could be and but one coronation ceremony in which a young prince was associated in power with his emperor-father. Constantine X, it is true, had associated his son Michael with him during his rule, but Constantine died in 1067 one year after the date of the Theodore psalter and the association of Constantine and Michael was earlier. After Constantine came the rule of his wife Eudocia together with her two sons, Michael VII and Constantine. Later Eudocia remarried, and her new husband, Romanus IV Diogenes, ruled from 1067 to 1071. After Romanus' death Michael VII resumed the throne until 1078 when he was dethroned by Nicephorus II Botaniates who remained in power until 1081. Nicephorus Melissenus also claimed the throne in 1081, but the intrigues about the throne were finally brought to an end by the assumption of power by Alexius I Comnenus who established himself and his family on the throne of Byzantium for many years to come. During the earlier portion of Alexius' reign his wife Irene gave birth to a daughter who was to become the famous Anna Comnena. She was at once betrothed to Constantine Ducas, the son of the former emperor Michael VII who was considered as the possible successor of Alexius. Alexius, according to Anna, had apparently made a promise to Constantine's mother, the queen Maria, that Constantine would be given imperial rank. Consequently he was allowed to wear the red shoes and to sign official documents with Alexius.⁷ But in 1088 the empress gave birth to a son, who was baptised John and after four years was crowned and associated in power with his father. That the coronation of John was impatiently awaited by the

⁶ They are: Mt. Athos, Pantocrator no. 60; Paris, Bib. Nat. gr. no. 20; Moscow, His. Mus., Chludoff Psalter; London, Brit. Mus. Add. 40731; London, Brit. Mus. Add. 19352; Rome, Vat. Lib. Barb. gr. 372; Berlin, Kupfers. Kab. Ham. 78 A 9.

⁷ That the association of Constantine with Alexius I prior to the coronation of John was not seriously official would appear from the fact that in contemporary documents such as those in the *Regii Neapolitani Archivi Monumenta*, V, acta 439, 440, 446-448, and 451, Alexius is mentioned as the sole emperor, but in those of 1092 and after (acta 457, 458, 462, 464, 467) John is mentioned as co-emperor with his father.

people desiring to see the male line of the Comnene dynasty perpetuated is indicated by the oration addressed to Alexius I by Theophylactus,⁸ who urged the emperor in flowery language to set his young cub on the throne. This coronation is the first of its particular kind which could be considered as the source for the Barberini miniature. The connection between the event and the miniature is strengthened by the fact that the prince in the miniature is beardless and of smaller size than his parents. It was apparently the custom in Byzantine art to represent a male child of imperial family who had not yet reached maturity as a beardless youth no matter what his age might be.⁹ Since John was only four years of age at the time of his coronation he might quite correctly be identified with the young prince in the miniature. John himself as sole emperor (1118-1143) associated his son Alexius with him as co-emperor, but this did not happen until after John's victory over the Patzinaks in 1122. At that time Alexius was sixteen years old and already considered mature, having been born twelve years before John became sole emperor. A miniature in the Vatican (cod. Vat. Urbin. Gr. 2)¹⁰ commemorates this event. In the miniature Alexius is bearded and represented as a grown-up like his father. Therefore the Barberini miniature cannot refer to this coronation. Alexius never became sole emperor, for he died in 1142 a year before the death of his father John. Manuel, a younger brother, was designated as his successor by the dying emperor. Manuel was about twenty years of age when he became emperor, and, as he was crowned after the death of his father, he is obviously not the prince in the Barberini miniature. He was married twice. His first wife, Bertha of Sulzbach, renamed Irene, bore him only daughters. His second wife, Marie of Antioch, bore a son in 1169 who was associated with his father in 1171 at the age of two. Here again we find a coronation ceremony in which a youthful prince figures. But this too cannot be the coronation represented in the Barberini miniature for various reasons. In the first place the date is too late for the style of the miniature and of the paleography, and in the second place we possess a miniature¹¹ representing Manuel and his queen Marie, and these portraits do not represent the same persons represented in the Barberini miniature. It becomes apparent therefore that the only interpretation of this miniature is that it represents the coronation of John Comnenus in 1092.

It so happens that there are two coins and a seal struck at the time of this coronation which give further support to this identification. One of the coins, a rare gold nomisma now in the British Museum, was first published by Sabatier¹² and later by

⁸ F. Chalandon, *Essai sur le règne d'Alexis I Comnène* (Paris, 1900), pp. 137 ff. Also Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, CXXVI, col. 301.

⁹ See also the portrait of the young Romanus on the ivory in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris: Goldschmidt-Weitzmann, *Die Byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, I, p. 35 and pl. XIV, 34.

¹⁰ C. Stornajolo, *Miniature dell' Omilie di Giacomo e dell' Evangelario Greco Urbinate*, pl. 83.

¹¹ Cod. Vat. Gr. 1176, fol. 11 recto in Lambros, *op. cit.*, pl. 69.

¹² J. Sabatier, *Description général des monnaies byzantines*, II, p. 203, no. 28, and plate 55, 1.



Fig. 2. Venice. Pala d'Oro (detail). The Empress Irene

Wroth¹³ who made the correct identification. The obverse of the coin shows Alexius and Irene standing on either side of a patriarchal cross; on the reverse is the figure of the small beardless John holding the labarum and the globe and being crowned by Christ standing beside him. The seal, erroneously published by Serlin-Dorigny¹⁴ as belonging to the family of John at the time of his sole rule, was correctly identified by Wroth in the light of the coin just cited. On this seal Alexius and Irene are on the one face and the beardless John accompanied by some saint on the other. They are identified by inscriptions.

The portraits of the emperor and the empress in the Barberini miniature correspond sufficiently closely to others of Alexius Comnenus and of Irene which exist. The emperor wears the dome-topped crown and has the long pointed black beard which appear in the portraits of Alexius in the Codex Vaticanus Graecus 666.¹⁵ The empress is almost identical with the figure of Irene present on the pala d'oro at Venice (Fig. 2). Both in the miniature and on the pala d'oro Irene wears the so-called thorakion¹⁶ bearing the device of the cross with double traverse. The thorakion is a conspicuous part of the ceremonial costume of Byzantine empresses from the eleventh century on, but the cross with double traverse is not always present. It is worn by the Empresses Zoë and Theodora on the enamel crown of Constantine Monomachos and by the Empress Irene on the pala d'oro at Venice. It is also worn by the Virgin on a Botkin enamel, by St. Helena in the mosaics of Hosios Loukas, in various Cappadocian frescoes, and on numerous reliquaries of the Holy Cross, and by St. Pulcheria in the eleventh-century frescoes in Sta. Sophia at Kiev.¹⁷ In all these cases the saints wear the costume of contemporary Byzantine empresses of the period in which the representation was made. It is clear why the device of the cross with double traverse should be given to St. Helena the discoverer of the Holy Cross, and also why the mother of Him who died on the cross should wear it. In the case of the Empress Pulcheria, sister of Theodosius II, the device also has significance, for she was called "a new Helena" by the council of Chalcedon in 451. It is not clear, however, why the eleventh-century empresses should wear it unless it be that the device had become an iconographic convention reverting to the contemporary empresses from the costume adopted for St. Helena.¹⁸

¹³ W. Wroth, *Imperial Byzantine Coins in the British Museum*, II, p. 544, no. 24, and plate LXV, 1. For the second coin see F. van Vleuten, *Zeitschrift für Numismatik*, VI, 1879, p. 676.

¹⁴ *Révue archéologique*, 1877, pt. I, p. 90, no. II, and plate IV, 6.

¹⁵ Lambros, *op. cit.*, plate 65.

¹⁶ For discussion of this detail of imperial costume and for examples see J. Ebersolt, *Mélanges d'histoire et d'archéologie byzantines* (Paris, 1917), p. 65; Jerphanion, *loc. cit.*, pp. 71 ff., and M. Bárány-Oberschall, *The Crown of the Emperor Constantine Monomachos* (Budapest, 1937), pp. 68-69.

¹⁷ G. Schlumberger, *L'épopée byzantine*, III, p. 45.

¹⁸ The Empress Theodora of iconoclastic fame is represented in the Menologion of Basil II

There are three final details in the Barberini miniature which are worth noting. (1) In the inscription which runs around the four sides of the miniature the word *εἰρηνικῇ* occurs as though intentionally placed at the head of the column immediately beside and above the figure of the empress Irene. (2) The emperor and his son both wear semi-spherical crowns, a type introduced by the Comnenes and having a special



Fig. 3. Palaeologan Ivory Box at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D. C.

(Courtesy of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection)

use. Anna herself describes it in the third book of the *Alexiad*,¹⁹ chapter iv: “The imperial diadem, or tiara, was like a semi-spherical close-fitting cap, and profusely adorned with pearls and jewels, some inserted and some pendant; on either of the temples two lappets of pearls and jewels hung down on the cheeks. *This diadem is the essentially distinctive feature of the imperial dress.*”²⁰ But the coronets of the

wearing a thorakion with the device of a cross with single traverse. In this case too the device could be explained as a symbol of her militant orthodoxy (see plate 392 in *Il Menologio di Basilio II*, Torino, 1907). St. Catherine also wears the device of the cross with single traverse in the narthex mosaics at Hosios Loukas.

¹⁹ E. A. S. Dawes, *The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena* (London, 1928), p. 78.

²⁰ The italics are mine.

Sebastocrators and Caesars are but sparingly decorated with pearls and jewels, and have no globe.” (3) The young John holds neither the usual mappa nor the globe in his left hand. Instead he holds a book with jewel-studded covers. It would seem therefore that the book had some special significance in this miniature. The most probable explanation for its presence would be the fact that it represents the actual manuscript in which the miniature occurs, and that this psalter was dedicated and presented either to the imperial family or to the young prince himself on the occasion of his coronation as co-emperor with his father. The fragment of the dedicatory inscription about the miniature would seem to point to that conclusion too.

We have, therefore, in this miniature another monument of Byzantine art to which we can attach a sufficiently definite date, a monument which can with certainty be associated with an exceedingly interesting and important event in the history of imperial Byzantium.²¹

ERNEST DE WALD

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

²¹ Interesting as later examples of the same iconography of the triple representation of emperor, empress, and young co-emperor are the two groups on the Palaeologan ivory now in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Georgetown, Washington, D. C. (Fig. 3); see J. Strzygowski, in *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, VIII, 1899, p. 262, and A. Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin* (Paris, 1936), p. 65 and plate VIII.

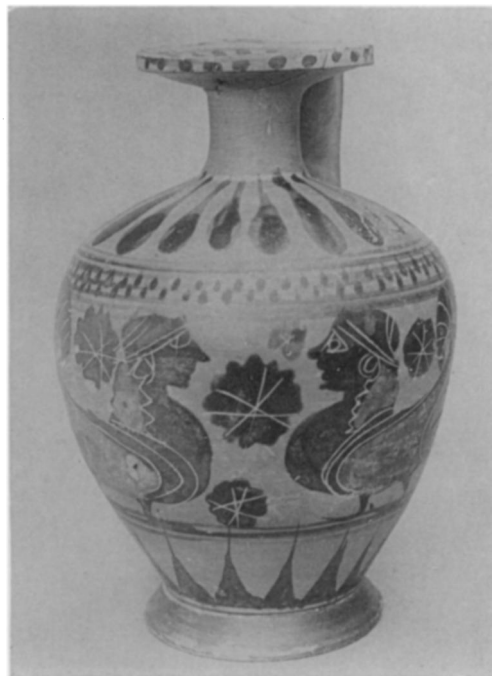
PLATE VIII



1. Hydria Formerly in the Paris Market



2. Aryballos in the Vlasto Collection



3. Aryballos in London, 1930. 12-17.1