

THE IMPERIAL AND HEAVENLY COURTS: THE ICONOGRAPHIC PATTERNS OF BYZANTINE COINAGE IN THE MACEDONIAN DYNASTY (867–1056)

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The numismatic designs on coins can offer insight into the specific imperial messages medieval rulers wanted to establish and perpetuate in their empire. The emperors of Byzantium follow this pattern, particularly with the numismatic designs originating in their capital Constantinople.¹ As coins would circulate throughout Byzantium, they provided one of the only direct means of iconographic communication from an emperor to their people during this time.² Therefore, it is not only necessary to examine these designs to gain insight into an individual emperor's idyllic public perception, but to place them within the context of their dynasty. Previous scholars have focused on isolated reigns, coins, or iconographic components, but less attention has been given to the iconographic trends of coinage

¹ The foundational study of Byzantine coinage is the five-volume catalog of coins in the collections at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC: Alfred R. Bellinger and Philip Grierson, eds., *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*, 5 vols. (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1966–1999). Hereafter, I will cite this series as DOC. The coins discussed in this essay can all be found in the third volume, available online, https://archive.org/details/docoins-3/DOCoins_3-1_WEB/ (accessed 23 January 2026), with the lone exception of Justinian II's coinage found in the second volume, <https://archive.org/details/docoins-2> (accessed 2 March 2026).

² Cécile Morrisson, "Displaying the Emperor's Authority and Kharaktèr on the Marketplace," In *Authority in Byzantium*, ed. Pamela Armstrong, 67.

within a particular dynasty.³ I investigate the context of numismatic designs, with an emphasis on the use of holy figures, within the Macedonian dynasty (867–1056), beginning with Basil I and ending with Zoe and Theodora.

The Macedonian dynasty was the second longest dynasty in Byzantium's history (fig. 1).⁴ It was portrayed as a lineage blessed by God *despite* its bloody beginning and, at times, tumultuous succession of rulers and usurpers. I argue that it is *due to* this violent and volatile pattern of succession

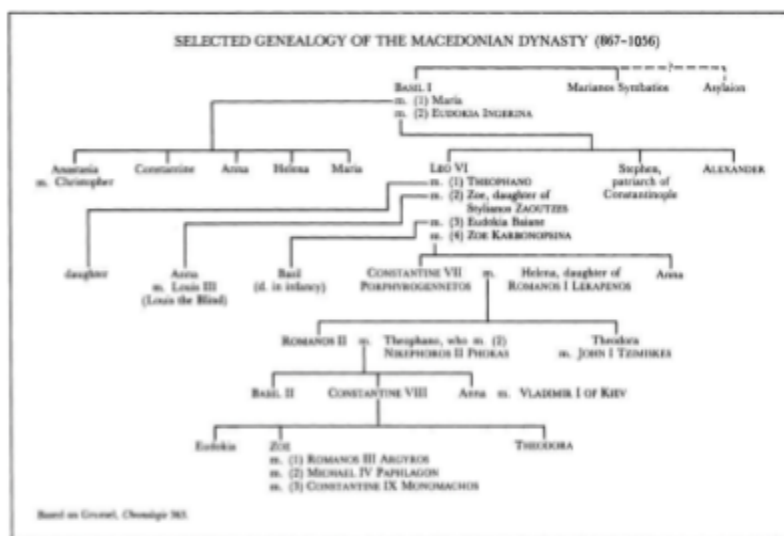


Figure 1. Macedonian Dynasty Family Tree. Image courtesy of the Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, Macedonian Dynasty - Oxford Reference.

that the Macedonian emperors sought to create a dynastic image of divine sanctioning to solidify their right to the throne. Coinage was one of the most prominent and widespread ways in which Byzantine rulers communicated this authority to their subjects.⁵ Gold coinage in particular during the Macedonian dynasty emphasized that numismatic designs were a direct messenger from the “divine emperor” to their people.⁶ I focus on three main aspects of numismatic iconography on the gold coinage of the Macedonian dynasty:

formatting, placement and timing. Formatting refers to the way in which the emperor's body is represented and scaled, either in full body or bust formats. Placement refers to the physical relationship between divine and imperial figures, either on the same side or different sides of a coin. Timing refers to when the coin was minted during the reign.⁷ Although the main focus of this paper is gold coinage, images on silver and copper will also be mentioned in isolated cases. I argue that the Macedonian

³ Timothy E. Gregory, “The Gold Coinage of the Emperor Constantine VII,” *Museum Notes (American Numismatic Society)* 19 (1974): 87–118; George P. Galavaris, “The Symbolism of the Imperial Costume as Displayed on Byzantine Coins,” *Museum Notes (American Numismatic Society)* 8 (1958): 99–117; Vasiliki Penna and Cécile Morrisson, “Usurpers and Rebels in Byzantium: Image and Message through Coins,” in *Power and Subversion in Byzantium*, eds. Michael Saxby and Dimitar Angelov (Routledge, 2013), 31–3.

⁴ Jonathan Shea, “The Macedonian Dynasty (862–1056),” *God's Regents on Earth: A Thousand Years of Byzantine Imperial Seals*, an online exhibition at Dumbarton Oaks, accessed February 2, 2026, <https://www.doaks.org/resources/online-exhibits/gods-regents-on-earth-a-thousand-years-of-byzantine-imperial-seals/imperial-dynasties/the-macedonian-dynasty-86220131056>.

⁵ Alfred R. Bellinger, “The Coins and Byzantine Imperial Policy,” *Speculum* 31, no. 1 (1956): 71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2850075>.

⁶ Robert Sabatino Lopez, “The Dollar of the Middle Ages,” *The Journal of Economic History* 11, no. 3 (1951): 214.

⁷ My analysis of timing relies on the mint dates provided by the DOC.

emperors utilized the chronological patterns of these iconographic elements to visually communicate their divine legitimacy to their subjects. While some emperors intentionally escalated the imagery on their coinage to emphasize their divine sanctioning through formatting, placement and timing, most maintained the pattern of their predecessors to establish their legitimacy through their bloodline.

Basil I (r. 867–86)

Starting as a stable boy in the imperial palace, Basil I worked his way up the imperial administration to eventually become crowned co-emperor by Michael III in 866.⁸ The following year, he murdered Michael, giving him sole control of the throne and marking the beginning of what would become the Macedonian dynasty.⁹ Establishing his legitimacy, separating himself from his direct predecessor, and creating an image of stability were essential for Basil if he wanted to be accepted by his new subjects. As a usurper, and former stable boy, Basil did not have the lineage to make a rightful claim to the throne. Therefore, he attempted to manufacture divine legitimacy, while separating himself from his immediate predecessor, to establish his power as an emperor through many avenues, including visual propaganda.¹⁰ One of the most effective methods for Basil to communicate his imperial claim to the public was through coins.



Figure 2. Gold Solidus of Basil I (DOC 1), Constantinople, 868. Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1966.210.1>.

Basil began minting his own coinage by 868 by introducing a new numismatic iconography of Christ (fig. 2).¹¹ On the obverse of his first gold coin is shown a full body image of an enthroned Christ. He is frontal and wears a tunic under a himation. His left hand holds a book and his right hand blesses his audience. The back of his throne is curved, resembling a lyre, and behind his head is a cruciform halo. This is the first instance of an enthroned Christ on

Byzantine coinage.¹² On the reverse, Basil is depicted from his head to his very small feet. He holds a

⁸ The eleventh-century author John Skylitzes provides a compelling account of Basil's rise to power: John Wortley, *John Skylitzes: A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057: Translation and Notes* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 113–5, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511779657.009>.

⁹ DOC, 3:473.

¹⁰ Leslie Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 151.

¹¹ DOC, 3:487. Note that in all of the coin figures the obverse is depicted on the viewer's left and denoted with an "O" whereas the reverse is on the viewer's right and denoted with an "R".

¹² DOC, 3:476–7.

globus cruciger in his right hand and wears a loros, the long gemmed scarf that wrapped the body of the emperor.

The two figures resemble each other in a number of ways. Both figures are depicted frontally in a full body format from their head to their toes. Their facial features show similarities in the jawline, the presence of the beard, the shape of the nose, and the placement of the eyes. The cross on the emperor's crown almost mirrors the size and shape of the cruciform halo around the head of Christ. Additionally, although the costumes of both Christ and the emperor look distinct stylistically, the loros worn by Basil represented a depiction of an imperial embodiment of Christ.¹³ Finally, through the inclusion of a throne, Basil is presenting Christ in a setting the emperor's subjects would associate with a terrestrial ruler. This *further* draws a comparison between the heavenly king and earthly emperor. Although the enthroned and standing positions differentiate Christ and the emperor, the details within the iconography draw blatant similarities between the two figures, suggesting that the emperor wanted to be viewed as Christ-like in the very first gold coin he minted. However, despite these similarities, there is still a distinct separation between the two figures as they exist in isolation on the obverse and reverse of this coin.



Figure 3. Gold Solidus of Basil I, Constantinople, 868-79 (DOC 2b). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1152>.

After the birth of Basil's first son, Constantine, he minted his second solidus.¹⁴ Similar to his first, it features the enthroned Christ on the obverse (fig. 3). The reverse of the new solidus depicts Basil and Constantine together in bust form. Basil, on the right, wears a loros while Constantine, on the left, wears a chlamys, a mantle that covers the left shoulder and is pinned on the right. This loros represents an imperial

superiority whereas the chlamys provides a more general elevation of social status and coronation celebration.¹⁵ Basil's seniority is also conveyed by the presence of his beard, whereas his son is shown younger and clean shaven. Between them, they hold a patriarchal cross with their right hands. The inclusion of Basil's new heir on his coinage establishes a strong lineage for the Macedonian dynasty.¹⁶

¹³ Galavaris, "The Symbolism of the Imperial Costume as Displayed on Byzantine Coins," 99–111. Note that this iconographical interpretation of the loros on coins was first established by Justinian II, the same emperor who was first to depict Christ on a gold coin.

¹⁴ DOC, 3:487-8.

¹⁵ Alfred R. Bellinger, "Byzantine Notes," *Museum Notes (American Numismatic Society)* 13 (1967): 123–66, at 127.

¹⁶ These messages are also reflected on Basil's subsequent gold and copper coins: DOC, 3:489, 493–500.

After the death of Constantine in 879, Basil temporarily stopped minting new solidi designs.¹⁷ The solidi with the enthroned Christ on the obverse and Basil and Constantine on the reverse likely stayed in circulation for the following three years without the introduction of new solidi designs. However, Basil did make a significant iconographic change during this time to a different numismatic



Figure 4. Copper Follis of Basil I, Constantinople, 879-886 (DOC 12). Image courtesy of the Blick-Harris Study Collection at Kenyon College, <https://digital.kenyon.edu/arhistorystudycollection/1710/>.

medium: his copper coins. In 879, Basil began minting a new follis featuring himself enthroned (fig. 4).¹⁸ Similar to his gold solidus featuring Christ, Basil sits frontal on a lyre-backed throne. His entire body is visible and he has a crown with a cross. In his right hand, he holds a labarum. With the introduction of this new copper iconography unaccompanied by new gold designs, there was likely a three year span where gold coins with Christ enthroned and copper coins with Basil

enthroned circulated simultaneously within the Byzantine empire. The combined circulation of these gold and copper iconographic designs would have sent a clear message to his people: Basil I was the earthly embodiment of the ruler in heaven, Christ. By mimicking the form of Christ on the gold coin, Basil is stating that he should be regarded as comparable to a holy figure, thereby solidifying his legitimacy as a divinely sanctioned ruler.

Through his gold and copper coinage, Basil manufactured his legitimacy as a divinely sanctioned emperor and disseminated this notion to the entirety of Byzantium. By starting his reign with gold coinage minted with novel iconography of Christ and his relationship to the emperor, Basil draws a comparison between the ruler of heaven and the ruler on earth. Centering his numismatic iconography on an enthroned holy figure and a standing, full body emperor, Basil is inviting his subjects to draw comparison between the two. Just as the emperor sits on a throne before his subjects, Christ is enthroned and Basil stands before him on the reverse of the coin.¹⁹ Through this analogy, Basil is likening himself to Christ while maintaining his subservient position — he is standing as a subject whereas the divine ruler has the position of imperial power on the throne. This narrative is furthered by Basil's copper coinage design in 879. Just as Christ is enthroned on the gold coinage, Basil was also enthroned on the copper. This draws an inherent inter-visual analogy between Christ and

¹⁷ DOC, 3:489.

¹⁸ DOC, 3:500–1.

¹⁹ A similar juxtaposition has been noted between the enthroned Christ in the narthex mosaic and the enthroned emperor that sits below it in the following article: Alicia Walker, "The Emperor at the Threshold,," in *The Emperor in the Byzantine World*, ed. Shaun Tougher (Routledge, 2019), 281–321.

Basil on the copper and gold coins circulated during this time. Despite the seemingly direct comparison between Christ and the emperor, Basil maintains his subservient position through the numismatic denomination. While the enthroned Christ is depicted on the highest denomination, the enthroned emperor is depicted on the lowest. As this image of Christ likely circulated more in the upper classes on the gold coin, Basil on the copper follis may have received a broader circulation throughout all levels of society. Through this direct yet subservient comparison, Basil establishes his legitimacy as a divinely sanctioned emperor as he rules on earth just as Christ rules in heaven.

Although the comparison Basil makes between himself and Christ on coinage is more overt



Figure 5. Gold Solidus of Justinian II, Constantinople, 692-5 (DOC 7f). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1966.169.6>.

than any of his predecessors, his use of Christ on Byzantine coinage is not completely novel. Justinian II (r. 685–695, 705–711) was the first emperor to introduce Christ onto Byzantine coinage (fig. 5), with Christ in a bust format on the obverse and the full body of the emperor depicted on the reverse.²⁰

Michael III, Basil's predecessor, had a similar iconographic format on his gold coinage with Christ in bust form on the obverse and

Michael and his heirs in a bust format on the

reverse.²¹ However, the *enthroned* Christ format on Basil's coins had not been previously introduced in Byzantine numismatics and drew a more tangible connection between the imperial power of the emperor and the divine power of Christ. Basil created a separation between himself and his direct predecessor through formatting. However, Basil maintained the placement model from previous rulers as he and Christ are separated by the obverse and reverse of the coin, thereby not overstepping the underlying christomemesis of the emperor.

The careful composition of Basil's coins in their placement, formatting and timing illustrate his goals and motivations as an emperor to legitimize himself despite being a usurper. The striking new iconography he introduces at the beginning of his reign creates a separation from his predecessor as well as establishing his right to rule. Basil then uses this iconography to emphasize his connection to Christ through similar full body formatting, while maintaining their separate placements on the obverse and reverse of the coin.

Leo VI (r. 886–912)

²⁰ DOC, 2:578. The image of a full body emperor on coinage had not been seen since the reign of Justinian II: DOC, 3:477.

²¹ DOC, 3:463.

Leo VI came to power in 886 after being introduced to the throne in 870 by his father and predecessor, Basil, despite not being his father's first choice.²² As a part of the newly established Macedonian dynasty, Leo had to uphold the image of divine legitimacy to compensate for his short imperial lineage. Simultaneously, he wanted to distance himself from his tumultuous, and very public, relationship with his late father.²³ Leo VI both continued to support the divinely sanctioned message of the newly established Macedonian dynasty whilst creating some distance between himself and his direct predecessor through timing, format, and placement.

Leo VI began minting his first gold solidus iconography in 886 (fig. 6).²⁴ The obverse depicts a



Figure 6. Gold Solidus of Leo VI, Constantinople, 886-908 (DOC 1b). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1153>.



Figure 7. Gold Solidus of Leo VI, Constantinople, 908-12 (DOC 2). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.14683>.

bust of the Virgin with her hands raised up in the orans pose whereas the reverse depicts a bust of Leo VI wearing a chlamys and a crown with a cross. This is the first depiction of the Virgin on Byzantine coinage.²⁵ The timing of this novel numismatic iconography, as it was the first gold coin of Leo VI, drew a clear distinction between Leo and his predecessor. However, the bust of a holy figure on the obverse and a bust of the emperor on the reverse, or what I term the bust-bust format, mirrors the same matched formatting on Basil's coinage when he depicted the full body formatting on both sides of his first coin, or what I term the full-full format. Additionally, the placement of a holy figure alone on the obverse and the emperor alone on the reverse sends a similar message as Basil's first coin: that Leo VI has received divine approval to the throne.

In 908, Leo VI returned to Basil's enthroned Christ iconography on the solidus with a seated Christ on the obverse and a full body Leo VI and his heir Constantine VII on the reverse (fig. 7).²⁶ This image of Christ paired with the current and future Byzantine emperors sends a message of longevity and divine strength in the Macedonian dynasty. This

²² DOC, 3:507.

²³ Shaun Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI (886-912): Politics and People* (Brill, 1997), 136–8.

²⁴ DOC, 3:512. Note that the labeling of obverse and reverse for this coin is somewhat disputed. See the labeling conventions of both the DOC reference and the American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1153>.

²⁵ DOC, 3:508.

²⁶ DOC, 3:513.

message was further supported by Leo VI's copper follis which depicts the emperor enthroned (fig. 8).²⁷ This iconography mirrored that of his late enthroned father. As this follis iconography was minted in tandem with the enthroned Christ on the solidus, this drew a clear connection between the role of Christ in the heavenly court and the role of the Byzantine emperor on earth. This interpretation is supported by other works of art during this period which clearly encouraged audiences to compare the earthly imperial role of the Macedonian emperor and the heavenly role of Christ.²⁸ Leo VI's numismatic iconography supported the dynasty's divine message through its timing both within the reign and in relation to other new iconographies, the placement of the emperor and the holy figure, and the mirrored bust-bust formatting between the holy figure and the emperor. In this way, Leo VI follows the key portions of the Macedonian model that Basil established during his reign while also creating a distinction between himself and his immediate predecessor.



Figure 8. Copper Follis of Leo VI, Constantinople, 886-912 (DOC 5). Image courtesy of the Blick-Harris Study Collection at Kenyon College, <https://digital.kenyon.edu/arhistorystudycollection/1584/>.

Alexander (r. 912–3)

Alexander rose to power in 912 after the death of his brother and predecessor Leo VI as the intended heir, his nephew Constantine VII, was only a child.²⁹ Although his reign was short, Alexander used timing, formatting and placement to continue the Macedonian message of divine strength. He also used these same numismatic tools established by his father and continued by his



Figure 9. Gold Solidus of Alexander, Constantinople, 912-3 (DOC 1). © Dumbarton Oaks, Coins and Seals Collection, Washington, DC.

brother to amplify the message of his divinely sanctioned nature and minimize the notion of his unwanted rise to power. Similar to Leo VI, Alexander maintained the bust-bust format on his first coin (fig. 9).³⁰ Instead of depicting the Virgin Mary, Alexander compares a bust of himself on the reverse with a bust of Christ on the obverse. The combination of iconography and

²⁷ DOC, 3:515–6.

²⁸ The narthex mosaic in Hagia Sophia is a prime example as featured in Walker, “The Emperor at the Threshold,” 281–321.

²⁹ DOC, 3:523.

³⁰ DOC, 3:524. This coin was gilded as opposed to purely gold.

matched obverse and reverse formatting again reinforces the likeness of the two sides and the message that the Macedonian dynasty was divinely sanctioned. Simultaneously, Alexander minted a gold solidus with an enthroned Christ on the obverse, an iconography that harked back to Basil and Leo (fig. 10).³¹ However, the reverse bore a very bold innovation. Alexander is depicted in full form wearing a loros and holding a globus cruciger. Strikingly, the emperor is also being crowned or blessed by a holy figure, which likely represents John the Baptist.³²



Figure 10. Gold Solidus of Alexander, Constantinople, 912-3 (DOC 2). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.931>.



Figure 11. Hosios Loukas Katholikon, Boeotia Greece, early 11th century. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hosios_Loukas_Katholikon_\(nave,_South-West_squinch\)_-_Baptism_01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hosios_Loukas_Katholikon_(nave,_South-West_squinch)_-_Baptism_01.jpg).

The depiction of an emperor sharing the same side of a coin as a holy person had never appeared before on any type of Byzantine coinage.³³ The emperor's ability to share this space inherently raises his status beyond those of an ordinary mortal and brings him physically and conceptually closer to a holy figure. Additionally, there is strong inter-visuality between the poses of John the Baptist and Alexander and those between John and Christ in traditional Byzantine scenes of the Baptism (fig. 11). Within this iconographic analogy, the emperor replaces Christ as the one "baptized" by John. The timing of these two solidi at the beginning of Alexander's reign highlights his legitimacy through both the placement of the emperor in relation to holy figures and their matched formatting.

Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (r. 913-59)

Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos' reign began when he was a mere infant after the unexpected death of Alexander in 913. The length of Constantine's rule, which spanned from his

³¹ DOC, 3:524-5.

³² Although the identity of this figure has previously been debated, John the Baptist seems to be the more likely candidate: Henry Maguire, "Style and Ideology in Byzantine Imperial Art," *Gesta* 28, no. 2 (1989): 217-31, at 226, <https://doi.org/10.2307/767070>; and Ioli Kalavrezou, "Helping Hands for the Empire: Imperial Ceremonies and the Cult of Relics at the Byzantine Court," in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. Henry Maguire (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1997), 74.

³³ DOC, 3:523.

infancy to his death in 959, can be split into three distinct eras: a co-rulership with mother Zoe Karbonopsina, a co-rulership with his father-in-law Romanos I Lekapenos, and a solo reign. I will consider the coinage of all three reigns separately in chronological order as they each bear unique iconographic messages.

Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos and Zoe Karbonopsina (r. 913-9)



Figure 12. Gold Solidus of Constantine VII and Zoe, Constantinople, 914-9 (DOC 2). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1968.131.285>.

The only gold coin from Constantine's and Zoe's reign is a solidus minted from 914-9 (fig. 12).³⁴ On the obverse is an enthroned Christ and on the reverse are busts of Constantine and Zoe. Zoe is positioned on the right side of the coin and holds the patriarchal cross with her hand above Constantine's. Additionally, Zoe is adorned with a loros, while Constantine wears a chlamys. These details communicate that Zoe is considered to have more imperial power in comparison to

Constantine. This iconography of an enthroned Christ harkens back to that of Basil's first coin of the dynasty, but the difference in formatting on the obverse and reverse of Zoe's coin does not draw an overt comparison between the holy figure and the mortal rulers. Zoe is solidifying her role within her reign with Constantine through a seamless continuation of previous numismatic designs and messages without directly comparing herself to the heavenly ruler. Although her iconographic design does not have any explicit unique elements, it is inherently innovative as it places a woman within a position of imperial power. The inclusion of the enthroned Christ as well as the subtle superiority over Constantine establishes her imperial power at the top of the current hierarchy through iconographic continuity. With this coin, Zoe illustrates her strength as a regent without disregarding the true heir to the throne.

Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos and Romanos I Lekapenos (r. 920-45)

Romanos I Lekapenos, a high-ranking military official, had his daughter Helena marry Constantine VII in 919.³⁵ This allowed him to increase his influence



Figure 13. Gold Solidus of Constantine VII and Romanos I, Constantinople, 920-45 (DOC 3). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1968.131.285>.

³⁴ DOC, 3:542. Note that Dumbarton Oaks lists an additional solidus minted during this time; DOC, 3:541. However, this solidus was a unique silver coin and therefore was not included in this analysis (although it does fit the pattern of using the same formatting on the obverse and reverse).

³⁵ DOC, 3:527.

over Constantine, and his coinage, and become co-emperor the following year. In 920, Constantine and Romanos' first gold solidus depicted an enthroned Christ on the obverse (fig. 13).³⁶ On the reverse are two busts, Constantine VII on the left and Romanos on the right. Each is wearing a traditional coronation loros while holding a patriarchal cross between them. The costume and position of the bust figures implies that Romanos and Constantine are at a similar status despite Constantine being the rightful heir. This first gold solidus establishes continuity with their predecessors, despite the



Figure 14. Gold Solidus of Constantine VII and Romanos I, Constantinople, 921 (DOC 4). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1156>.

tumultuous beginning of the reign, while placing the two rulers on the same hierarchical plane.³⁷

This relationship becomes increasingly more unequal with each successive coin minted under the regency of Romanos.³⁸

The second solidus, minted just a year later, again depicts Christ enthroned on the obverse and the two busts of Constantine and Romanos on the reverse holding a cross between them (fig. 14).³⁹

The dynamic has clearly shifted, as Constantine is wearing a chlamys as opposed to a loros. This suggests that Romanos has elevated himself over Constantine.

On his third gold solidus, Romanos depicts full body images of the legitimate heir Constantine and Christopher, Romanos' son, on the reverse (fig. 15).⁴⁰ On the obverse stands a full body image of Romanos being crowned by Christ. This obverse imagery plays on the same iconography of Alexander being crowned by a holy figure to establish his legitimacy as ruler but taken a step further. Romanos is being crowned not by John the Baptist, but by Christ himself. The direct crowning by Christ, and their ability to share the same space, explicitly shows that Romanos is a divinely sanctioned, and thereby legitimate, emperor. Additionally, among the three mortals on the coin, Constantine, the legitimate ruler, is put in a semi-subordinate position. On the reverse of the coin, Christopher's hand is placed above Constantine's on the patriarchal cross. Additionally, Christopher is



Figure 15. Gold Solidus of Romanos I, Constantine VII, and Christopher, Constantinople, 921 (DOC 5). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1157>.

³⁶ DOC, 3:542-3.

³⁷ DOC, 3:527.

³⁸ Note that this is not a completely novel argument but the novel aspects relate to this model's application for later members of the Macedonian dynasty. See the following for other authors following this argument: Penna and Morrisson, "Usurpers and Rebels in Byzantium," 31; Gregory, "The Gold Coinage of the Emperor Constantine VII," 87-118.

³⁹ DOC, 3:543.

⁴⁰ DOC, 3:544.

adorned with a coronation loros whereas Constantine is wearing a chlamys. Romanos makes two bold claims with this coin: first, that he is worthy to share the same space as Christ and second that his son Christopher has more power than the legitimate ruler Constantine.

On his subsequent gold coins, Romanos uses the traditional enthroned Christ to legitimize the people he wishes to see in power. For example, in figure 16, Romanos minted a solidus with an enthroned Christ on the obverse and himself and Christopher on the reverse.⁴¹ In this way, he completely disregarded Constantine despite him being the only legitimate ruler.⁴² Romanos only began to include Constantine again on his gold solidi in 931, after the death of Christopher. As Romanos had been legitimizing his son Christopher in the public eye for a decade, his death forced Romanos to turn back to Constantine as the rightful heir. This shift in messaging was marked with bust-bust formatting depicting Christ on the obverse and the emperors on the reverse (fig. 17), symbolizing the need to bring Constantine back into the public spotlight.⁴³ Nearing the end of Romanos' reign, he began to adopt formatting parallels between the obverse and the reverse similar to Basil's reign. This was conveyed through either the bust-bust format of Christ and the



Figure 16. Gold Solidus of Romanos I and Christopher, Constantinople, 921-31 (DOC 7). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.14687>.



Figure 17. Copper Solidus of Constantine VII and Romanos I, Constantinople, c. 930 (DOC 9). © Dumbarton Oaks, Coins and Seals Collection, Washington, DC



Figure 18. Gold Solidus of Constantine VII and Romanos I, Constantinople, 931-44 (DOC 10). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1159>.

emperors (fig. 17) or the full-full format of the enthroned Christ and the standing emperors (fig. 18).⁴⁴ As the shift from Romanos being a co-emperor to Constantine becoming a solo emperor drew nearer, so did the coinage iconography begin to shift back toward the established models of Basil. The many phases in Romanos' reign alongside Constantine were reflected in his coinage. At the start and end of his reign, he looked to the models established by

⁴¹ DOC, 3:546.

⁴² It is also of note that during this same time, Romanos was also minting copper folles. From 931–944, Romanos minted a follis which only depicts himself on the obverse (DOC, 3:562) as opposed to including the rightful emperor. Romanos was promoting himself as the sole emperor to anyone who had the copper folles as opposed to acknowledging any of his co-emperors.

⁴³ DOC, 3:548. Note that this coin in the DOC collection is copper despite having a solidus design.

⁴⁴ DOC, 3:548–9.

Basil. In the middle, as he attempted to integrate his sons into the dynasty, his designs were much more innovative in order to elevate the status of his own family line. These patterns continued to influence the remainder of the Macedonian dynasty, either in following Romanos' model of escalation or contrasting it with a clear iconographic continuity.

Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (r. 945–59)

After Constantine co-ruled under Romanos, he began a new pattern of numismatic iconography that lasted until the end of the Macedonian dynasty. Within his new formatting, Constantine maintained the same messages perpetuated by his predecessors from the foundation of the dynasty. I argue, alongside other scholars, that Constantine within his reign worked to establish a new model for Macedonian coinage that harkened back to the founder of the dynasty but also separated himself from his immediate predecessor.⁴⁵

Constantine begins his reign with a bust-bust format gold solidus with Christ on the obverse and himself on the reverse (fig. 19).⁴⁶ Christ is depicted bearded on the obverse wearing a tunic as he blesses the viewer with his right hand. Constantine is also bearded on the reverse wearing a chlamys. The simple comparison between Christ and a single emperor is reminiscent of the first gold coin of Basil. Unlike Basil, however, the proportions are very similar between Christ and Constantine. In Basil's coin, Christ seated was the same height as a standing Basil, implying that Christ was taller and held a superior position of power. Constantine's solidus does not draw the same distinction as each bust fills its respective side of the coin. Constantine furthers this equality of status through facial hair as both figures are bearded which indicates an older age and imperial superiority. Constantine is comparing himself to Christ not only in their formatting but also implicitly through the subtle indication of a similar hierarchical power. Additionally, the bust-bust format separates him from the common enthroned Christ iconography of Basil, turning back to the even older designs of Justinian II.⁴⁷



Figure 19. Gold Solidus of Constantine VII, Constantinople, 945 (DOC 11). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1160>.



Figure 20. Gold Solidus of Constantine VII and Romanos II, Constantinople, 945 (DOC 14.1). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1161>.

⁴⁵ Penna and Morrisson, "Usurpers and Rebels in Byzantium," 31.

⁴⁶ DOC, 3:550.

⁴⁷ DOC, 2:648.

Despite the initial separation between Constantine and his immediately preceding co-emperors, when Constantine chose to introduce his son Romanos II as his new co-emperor in 945, he punctuated this introduction with an enthroned Christ (fig. 20).⁴⁸ This pattern would have been closely associated with the design and timing established by his grandfather (Basil I), and continued by his father (Leo VI), uncle (Alexander), and mother (Zoe) when they introduced new co-rulers. With the enthroned Christ iconography, Constantine is embedding himself in an established tradition as well as drawing the classic Macedonian comparison between the imperial family and the heavenly rulers. However, he only minted this enthroned Christ coin in 945, whereas he minted a bust-bust format coin with himself and Romanos II from 945–959.⁴⁹ This suggests that he wanted the bust-bust formatted coin to have an increased audience and longevity, as it was minted over a longer period of time. Similar to the model established by Basil, Constantine draws a direct comparison between the imperial ruler on earth and the holy ruler in heaven using formatting, timing and placement.

The Later Half of the Dynasty

The emperors who ruled after Constantine VII's death in 959 followed one of two iconographic trends with their coinage: continuity or escalation.⁵⁰ The continuity iconographic trend followed the model set by Constantine VII with his new bust-bust formatting. The escalation iconographic trend followed the models established by Alexander and perpetuated by Romanos I, increasing the intensity of previous numismatic iconography to relay their imperial messages.

Continuity

Four emperors in the later half of the Macedonian dynasty consistently followed the model set by Constantine VII for their first gold solidi: Romanos II (r. 959–63), Basil II (r. 976–1025),

⁴⁸ DOC, 3:551–2.

⁴⁹ DOC, 3:552–3.

⁵⁰ For a brief chronology: After the death of Constantine VII, his son Romanos II took the throne (r. 959–63). His untimely death left behind two young heirs – Basil II and Constantine VIII. As neither of his successors were old enough to rule on their own, their mother Theophano was appointed as their regent. Simultaneously, the great military general Nikephoros II Phokas was proclaimed emperor by his soldiers. He usurped the throne and ruled until he was murdered (r. 963–9), likely at the hands of his immediate successor, John I Zimiskes. John attempted to solidify his legitimacy by entering the Macedonian family through marriage, but he left behind no heir (r. 969–76). Basil II then reclaimed his rightful place for 49 years (r. 976–1025). Constantine VIII ruled for an additional three years following the death of his older brother (r. 1025–8). Constantine had no male heir, but had two daughters — Zoe and Theodora. Zoe was able to maintain the throne through a series of marriages. Her first husband, Romanos III Argyros (r. 1028–1034) did not produce a male heir and was subsequently murdered by Zoe's second husband, Michael IV the Paphlagonian (r. 1034–1041). Together Zoe and Michael IV adopted the late Romanos III's nephew, Michael V Kalaphates (r. 1041–1042), as their rightful heir. After Michael V's removal due to public uprising, Zoe and her sister ruled jointly in their own right for a few months in 1042, until Zoe married Constantine IX Monomachos (r. 1042–1055). After Zoe died in 1050 and Constantine IX followed her in 1055, Theodora ruled alone for 19 months, passing away in August of 1056.

Constantine VIII (r. 1025–8) and Michael IV the Paphlagonian (r. 1034–41).⁵¹ These emperors all adopted the bust-bust formatting with a bearded bust of Christ on the obverse and a bust of themselves on the reverse. This formatting consistency was a way to establish the continuous and coherent message of power by drawing on the success of their Macedonian ancestors. All of these emperors were direct blood relatives to the Macedonian lineage, with the exception of Michael IV, who was married to Zoe, Constantine VIII's eldest daughter. Therefore, it was in their best interest to maintain the continuity of the iconographic designs and uphold this imagery invoked, as it called upon their innate legitimacy and imperial strength.

Escalation

Although many emperors succeeding Constantine VII followed his bust-bust format on their coins, there were also notable deviations from this established model. The three recognizable deviations came from Nikephoros II Phokas (r. 963–9), John I Zimiskes (r. 969–76) and Romanos III Argyros (r.

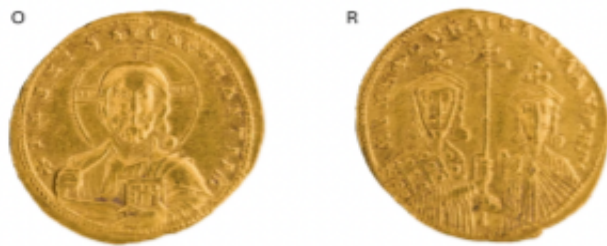


Figure 21. Gold Nomisma of Nikephoros, Constantinople, 963-9 (DOC 1). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1164>.



Figure 22. Gold Nomisma of Nikephoros, Constantinople, 963-9 (DOC 4). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.14695>.

1028–34) who were not bloodline family members and all held flimsy claims to the throne. Soon after Nikephoros II was proclaimed emperor by his army and married Theophano, the mother of the young heirs Basil II and Constantine VIII, he followed the model that Constantine had set forth in gold solidi. In his very first gold coin, Nikephoros had the customary bust of Christ on the obverse (fig. 21).⁵² On the reverse, he depicted himself alongside Basil II. The inclusion of a second emperor on the reverse was not novel as previous rulers had used a depiction of Christ on the obverse to legitimize a new co-ruler into their reign.⁵³ Nikephoros' use of this iconography suggests that he was attempting to present himself

as the rightful ruler of Byzantium despite his lack of direct familial connections. After this coin, however, Nikephoros began following a pattern of iconographic escalation that was first established by Alexander and continued by Romanos I. In 963, Nikephoros began minting a new gold coin (fig. 22).⁵⁴

⁵¹ DOC 3:576; 3:613; 3:708; 3:724.

⁵² DOC, 3:582. Note that the gold coins beginning in Nikephoros' reign are no longer labeled as solidi in the DOC due to weight changes but they maintain a similar iconographic appearance: DOC, 3:581.

⁵³ Refer back to the coinage of Basil I and that of Romanos I for the introduction of new emperors regardless of legitimacy.

⁵⁴ DOC, 3:583–4.

Again, a bust of Christ was on the obverse. Instead of Basil II and Nikephoros on the reverse, however, Nikephoros is depicted beside the Virgin. They are both holding the patriarchal cross with her hand placed above his, signaling her power over him. Despite her position of power on the coin, the ability for Nikephoros to be in her presence increases his status. Additionally, the exclusion of Basil II ensured that the empire would only associate Nikephoros with the throne, as numismatic designs were seen as a direct communication from a ruler to their people. This was an attempt by Nikephoros to establish himself as the sole ruler of Byzantium, sanctioned by both the Virgin and Christ.

Although Basil II was still the rightful Macedonian heir, John I Zimiskes usurped the throne after the death of Nikephoros. John I began by minting a gold coin in 969 (fig. 23), where he continued the usurper trend of iconographic escalation.⁵⁵ The obverse has a bust of Christ. The reverse shows a bust of John and the Virgin. Instead of the Virgin passively

positioned beside him, however, she is on the left crowning him. Additionally, the hand of God is seen peeking out of the clouds above to give his personal blessing for the crowning of John. These added elements of directed divine approval escalated the imagery to illustrate that John I was a rightful ruler whilst excluding Basil II entirely. With this gold coin, John argues for his divine right to the throne in the public eye against Basil II who is the legitimate ruler.

Romanos III's coinage, specifically the gold, harkens back to the coinage of Alexander and Romanos I. Romanos III was the first husband of Zoe, the eldest daughter of Constantine VIII. His first minted gold coin completely shifted the focus from the model set by Constantine VII back to the founder of the dynasty Basil I. On the obverse is an enthroned Christ sitting on a square backed throne (fig. 24), an iconography that had not been seen for approximately a century.⁵⁶ Christ holds his right hand up, blessing the audience, and cradles a book in his left hand. On the obverse, Romanos III is depicted beside the Virgin. She is standing on the right side and crowning him with her right hand. Both of their bodies are depicted from head to toe. This iconography of a holy figure crowning an emperor is reminiscent of the gold coin minted by Alexander, adapted and promoted by Romanos I, and modified further by John I (fig. 10, fig. 15, and fig. 23). Romanos III



Figure 23. Gold Nomisma of John, Constantinople, 969-76 (DOC 1). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1167>.



Figure 24. Gold Nomisma of Romanos III, Constantinople, 1028-34 (DOC 1b). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.1177>.

⁵⁵ DOC, 3:592.

⁵⁶ DOC, 3:715. Note that this is different from the lyre backed throne from the coinage of Basil I.

combines the imagery of these past emperors by depicting his full body while being crowned by the Virgin. This amplification of Romanos III's divine right to the throne was a way for him to establish his legitimacy in the public's eye.

The last of the bloodline heirs of the dynasty, Constantine VIII's daughters, Zoe and Theodora, who ruled in their own right at different moments without a husband, maintained some consistency with previous iconographic patterns but strayed from the model established by Constantine VII to legitimize their right to the throne despite their gender.⁵⁷ Zoe, who ruled by herself for a short period, minted two new copper coins, but no gold coins, under her name only. The



Figure 25. Copper Nomisma of Zoe, Constantinople, 1041-2 (DOC 1). After DOC, 3:LVIII.

first coin minted in 1041 depicted Christ from the waist up on the obverse (fig. 25).⁵⁸ He blesses the viewer with his right hand and holds a book with his left hand. On the reverse is a bust of Empress Zoe holding a beaded scepter in one hand and a globus in her left. Zoe's first coin has the same imperial message as that of her great-grandfather, Constantine VII. Zoe is making a direct comparison between herself and the heavenly ruler as a way to establish her legitimacy as empress. However, Zoe tweaks this model by scaling herself to be larger than Christ on the obverse. This scaling suggests that Zoe may be



Figure 26. Copper Nomisma of Zoe, Constantinople, 1041-2 (DOC 2). © Dumbarton Oaks, Coins and Seals Collection, Washington, DC.

overcompensating for her gender as she depicts herself as larger than Christ. The second copper coin of interest, also minted from 1041 to 1042, has a bust of empress Zoe on the obverse and a bust of an unnamed emperor with a long beard on the reverse (fig. 26).⁵⁹ This figure is presumably her adopted son, Michael V Kalaphates, due to the beard and the modified loros.⁶⁰ This coin better fits the model set forth by Constantine as

⁵⁷ Zoe ruled alone from 10–13 December 1041 and ruled with her adopted son Michael V from December 1041–April 1042: DOC, 3:727. Zoe and Theodora then maintained a joint reign from April to June of 1042: DOC, 3:731.

⁵⁸ DOC, 3:729.

⁵⁹ DOC, 3:730. Additionally, Zoe minted a miliaresion which follows the same bust-bust format with the Virgin on the obverse and Zoe on the reverse (DOC, 3:730). Within all three of these coins, Zoe is depicted alone on one side of the coin. This solo positioning could emphasize her power as an empress who does not need the support of others to rule effectively.

⁶⁰ The lack of inscription calls the identity of this figure into question. However, there are no coins minted that explicitly name Michael V so there is no definitive answer to this question: DOC, 3:727.

the imperial and heavenly rulers are in bust format. However, in following that model it places Zoe in the position of Christ, thereby emphasizing her legitimacy despite her gender.

The second reign of interest was a joint reign of Zoe and Theodora which lasted from April 20th, 1042 to June 11th, 1042 without a male co-ruler. They minted one gold nomisma, and it bore a unique iconography. On the obverse is a bust of the Virgin (fig. 27).⁶¹ The Virgin holds her hands up in an orant gesture; a medallion depicting an infant Christ is positioned in front of her chest. On the reverse are two busts of the empresses, Zoe on the left and Theodora on the right holding a labarum between them. This coin only depicts female figures alongside Christ which



Figure 27. Gold Nomisma of Zoe and Theodora, Constantinople, 1042 (DOC 1). Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1977.158.932>.

emphasizes the power of the empresses not only as rulers, but also as women. Although previous coins had included busts of the Virgin instead of Christ, this format in particular with the Virgin on the obverse and the empresses on the reverse is reminiscent of the bust-bust model set by Constantine VII. This juxtaposition was particularly striking as it was the only coin minted during their joint reign. The change in iconography emphasizes both the salient unique features of Zoe and Theodora while also relying on the established symbols of divine acceptance from the Macedonian dynasty.

These examples of iconographic escalation illustrate real, or perceived, deficits in legitimacy for specific Macedonian rulers. Specifically, rulers compensated for these deficits by increasing their proximity to holy figures through either positioning or formatting. Their proximity was then emphasized through the timing of the coins which showed an establishment of their legitimacy through the escalation within a single reign. Iconographic patterns of escalation could have been a way for Macedonian rulers to “over-correct” for their perceived or actual lacking legitimacy by emphasizing their proximity to holy figures.

Conclusion

From Basil I to Romanos I, there was a distinct continuity between the numismatic iconography and their underlying messages. The unique formatting of this time period, with the introduction of the enthroned Christ on the gold solidus paired with similarly proportioned emperors on the reverse drew an overt juxtaposition between Christ ruling in heaven and the Byzantine emperors ruling on earth. The timing of these coins, as they typically appeared at the beginning of an imperial reign, emphasized this message as a way to divinely sanction the new emperor. Finally, the placement of

⁶¹ DOC, 3:732.

imperial figures in relation to holy ones, either mimicking the same formatting on the follis or placing both mortal and holy entities in the same space, served to amplify these messages. These ideals established at the beginning of the dynasty by Basil I pioneered a common language of legitimacy and continuity passed from the imperial rulers to their subjects, allowing his successors to follow or adapt his model as a continuation of this same message.

These models continued to influence and perpetuate the numismatic design choices made by later emperors within the Macedonian dynasty. Whether later rulers created a continuity with their predecessors or escalated to compensate for their perceived illegitimacy, the visual language established by earlier Macedonian rulers served as a model for their successors. By adhering or adding to previous iconographic patterns, later Macedonian emperors established their own legitimacy by emphasizing their sanctioning by their mortal predecessors as well as the heavenly rulers.

Through formatting, placement, and timing, Macedonian emperors used these unique techniques to guide their numismatic decisions from Basil I to Zoe and Theodora. These continued patterns illustrate a deeper meaning to the numismatic designs: they were not just for looks but to communicate specific messages to the Byzantine people. Throughout this paper, I demonstrated how numismatic patterns were established and modified during the Macedonian dynasty to further messages of legitimacy and imperial strength. Specifically, these Macedonian emperors drew upon the divine power of holy figures to legitimize their reigns. However, we still have limited evidence on how these iconographic choices affected the public.⁶² We can only infer that these numismatic designs were effective as similar models were perpetuated throughout the lifespan of the Macedonian dynasty, and beyond. Overall, emperors with a previously established right to the throne focused their messaging on imperial strength and continuity, whereas those who did not begin with this right focused on legitimacy and divine sanctioning.

⁶² Morisson, "Displaying the Emperor's Authority and Kharaktèr on the Marketplace," 78–82.

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