
CHRISTOPHER JAMES SPRECHER, *Emperor and God: Passion Relics and the Divinisation of Byzantine Rulers, 944–1204* (Kulturelles Erbe: Materialität – Text – Edition, 5). Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2024. xx + 241 pp. – ISBN 978-3-96822-226-4 (hardcover), 978-3-96822-225-7 ([pdf in open access](#))

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Byzantine, pilgrim, and crusader accounts alike attest to the vast wealth of sacred relics stored in Constantinople before the sack of the city in 1204. No sanctuary was as richly endowed with relics of Christ’s passion as the palace chapel, the Church of the Theotokos of the Pharos. According to such witnesses as the church’s *skeuophylax* (sacristan) Nicholas Mesarites and the French knight Robert of Clari who participated in the Fourth Crusade, this chapel could claim a virtually ‘complete set’ of relics that bore witness to the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord. This was due to centuries of relic inventions and translations initiated by emperors and empresses, particularly in the middle Byzantine period (843–1204). The acquisition, presence, and use of these relics legitimized and sanctified their reigns.

In his new book, CHRISTOPHER SPRECHER examines three relics associated with Christ in order to investigate the ways in which these sacred items magnified the sacrality of the emperor and his office. Through a close study of texts and objects, SPRECHER traces this development from 944, when the Mandylion was acquired, to 1204, when many of these relics were lost. He argues that over the course of two centuries and a half there was an increased association between the emperor and his relic collection, allowing him to assume a portion of divinity for himself. The book consists of an introduction (Chapter 1), three case studies (Chapters 2–4), a conclusion (Chapter 5), and three appendices of Byzantine Greek texts translated into English for the first time. The three core chapters focus on relics that were acquired or curated by emperors, and on texts that speak to the specific relationships that these relics had with their imperial patrons.

Chapter 2 is a study of the Mandylion, a cloth with a miraculously produced impression of Jesus Christ’s face which Romanos I Lekapenos and Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos brought from Edessa to Constantinople in 944. SPRECHER analyzes images and various genres of literary texts in

chronological order, beginning with a *Narration* whose author Constantine VII gives himself sole credit for the relic's acquisition. SPRECHER argues that in this first account, the relic is presented as a powerful protector for the city and for its people as a whole. Over the next two centuries, numerous liturgical texts were written in order to honor the Mandylion and to perpetuate the memory of its translation. These increasingly stress the unique ways in which it was bound specifically to the emperor. The relic was likened to a new Ark of the Covenant, and the Byzantine ruler, to a new David. This was also one of the few relics that was sealed in a container and hidden from public view; to look upon it was the sole privilege of its imperial caretaker. Housed in the Pharos chapel, adjacent to the imperial bedchamber, the Mandylion came to be understood as an embodiment of God's presence that strengthened the sacrality of the emperor as a man, and not just of his office.

Chapter 3 examines a famous staurotheke now kept in the Diözesanmuseum in Limburg an der Lahn, Germany. Made for Constantine VII and his son Romanos II sometime between 945 and 959, it was later added to, or reworked, by Basil Lekapenos, son of Romanos I and brother-in-law to Constantine VII. Whereas in the first chapter SPRECHER primarily relies on textual sources, here he is able to examine an extant work of art. Through close reading of its iconography and inscriptions, as well as of textual sources contemporary with the object – such as the *Book of Ceremonies* and the harangues of Constantine VII – SPRECHER argues that the staurotheke was designed to communicate the indissoluble bond that the emperors Constantine VII and Romanos II had with passion relics. He reconstructs the courtly, clerical, and military audiences and contexts in which the staurotheke was activated and in which its message of imperial sacrality would have resonated.

Chapter 4 then fast-forwards to the reign of Manuel I Komnenos and his translation in 1169 of the Holy Stone, upon which Christ's body was laid, from the city Ephesos to the Constantinopolitan Pharos chapel. The contemporary or near-contemporary historians John Kinnamos and Niketas Choniates state that the emperor bore the large marble slab upon his shoulders. The translation was then immortalized in a liturgical office, composed not too long after the event, attributed to Manuel's secretary George Skylitzes. While the date of this office is not recorded, SPRECHER makes an insightful analysis of the *heirmoi* in its *kanon* and convincingly argues a feast day of 17 August 1169. His close reading of the office shows how its wording and biblical references stress the Christ-like character of Manuel.

The close association between the emperor and his relic was then cemented after Manuel's death, when the red marble slab was placed on a pedestal next to his tomb in the Pantokrator Monastery. This action, SPRECHER argues, immortalized the nature of the divine ruler. No longer was he 'simply blessed or elected or "anointed"'; he was now 'being called divine and seemingly assimilated to the second person of the Trinity' (p. 168).

SPRECHER's book is extremely well researched. Its footnotes alone serve as a rich storehouse of information that not only supports the arguments, but also serves as a resource for future work. His analysis offers new insights into the sources, some well-known and others examined here for the first time. He pays close attention to the language, phrasing, and manner in which the texts shaped contemporary understandings of the relics and of the emperors associated with them. His book is also valuable for the way in which it situates texts and objects in a holistic historical setting. The reader is able to better consider the inter-visual and inter-textual contexts in which each of these sources would have been activated and experienced.

There are three criticisms that one should take into consideration when reading this book. The first concerns the way SPRECHER positions this study. While he is right to situate the book within the scholarship on relics, he falls short in articulating how it contributes to the recent and growing literature on the sanctification and veneration of emperors, especially from the Macedonian period and later.¹ While Constantine I was the only emperor to be recognized as a saint before the thirteenth century, there were others whose veneration and memory were perpetuated in various ways within their lifetimes and beyond. This book certainly contributes to this work, but the reader is left without that framing.

1. Select bibliography: GILBERT DAGRON, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, tr. Jean Birrell. Cambridge 2003; KATERYNA KOVALCHUK, *The Founder as a Saint: The Image of Justinian in the Great Church of St Sophia*. *Byzantion* 77 (2007) pp. 205–238; LORENZO M. CIOLFI, *Not Another Constantine: Rethinking Imperial Sainthood through the Case of John III Vatatzes*. *New Europe College Yearbook* (2015–2016), pp. 23–52; DENIS SULLIVAN, *The Rise and Fall of Nikephoros II Phokas: Five Contemporary Texts in Annotated Translations* (*Byzantina Australiensia* 23). Leiden 2019), *passim*, esp. pp. 192–237; LYNN JONES, *Visual Evidence for the Mutability of Identity in the Middle Byzantine Period*. In: KORAY DURAK – IVANA JEVTIĆ (eds.), *Identity and the other in Byzantium: Papers From the Fourth International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium*. Istanbul 2019, pp. 129–142; EADEM, *The Imperial Cult in Middle Byzantine Art: Cappadocia and Constantinople*. In: NIKOS D. KONTOGIANNIS – TOLGA B. UYAR (eds.), *Space and Communities in Byzantine Anatolia, Papers from the Fifth International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium*. Istanbul 2021, pp. 357–376.

The second criticism has to do with the case studies selected by SPRECHER, and how their individual conclusions can speak to the overall argument. While SPRECHER argues for a diachronic evolution where the bond between emperor and God became increasingly explicit, culminating at the end of the twelfth century, it is difficult to see how each case study contributes to this development. The discussion of the Mandylion is perhaps the most successful because there are so many texts responding to this particular relic from its translation in 944 to the writings of Nicholas Mesarites ca. 1200. Over the course of these 250 years the reader can see through SPRECHER's insightful analyses how the rhetoric surrounding this relic evolved to more closely portray the emperor as an image of Christ. For the Limburg Staurotheke, there are plenty of sources that date to the time around its creation in the mid-tenth century, but what about the object's afterlife through the eleventh and twelfth centuries? Basil Lekapenos was exiled in 985, so his contribution to the reliquary must predate his downfall. Our next confirmed reference comes in 1208, when the German crusader Heinrich von Ulmen donated the reliquary to the Abbey of St. Nicholas in Stuben.² What happened to it and how it was received by its Byzantine imperial audience from 985 to 1208 is unknown to us. Was it continually used generation after generation or stored away in a closet only to be superseded by other imperial reliquaries? A diachronic analysis is also not possible for the Holy Stone, as its arrival to the city was in 1169, just thirty-five years before the Fourth Crusade. While SPRECHER's three chosen objects offer different perspectives on the sacred dimensions of the emperor, they do not, as a group, address the diachronic development that his book sets out to outline. To be fair, SPRECHER's monograph was not meant to be a comprehensive look at all imperial relics. He explicitly states that his three case studies were chosen because there is a relative wealth of source material.³ Individually, each chapter presents a compelling argument regarding the nature of the emperor and the office, but together they buckle under the weight of the book's thesis, which they cannot support.

The third criticism of SPRECHER's book has to do with the inclusion of un-

2. HANS-WOLFGANG KUHN, *Heinrich von Ulmen, der vierte Kreuzzug und die Limburger Staurothek*. *Jahrbuch für westdeutsche Landesgeschichte* 10 (1984), pp. 67–106.

3. Another relic that could have been included in this study is the arm of John the Baptist – not a passion relic, to be sure, but one that also had important ceremonial significance from Constantine VII to 1204; see IOLI KALAVREZOU, *Helping Hands for the Empire: Imperial Ceremonies and the Cult of Relics at the Court*. In: HENRY MAGUIRE (ed.), *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*. Washington DC 1996, pp. 53–80.

necessary material and arguments. In Chapter 2, for example, SPRECHER presents the visual sources on the Mandylion, including the famous tenth-century Sinai icon with King Abgar (fig. 1, p. 31), the painted image of the Mandylion and Keramion in a mid-eleventh-century manuscript in the Vatican Library (fig. 5, p. 55), and the twelfth-century narrative miniatures preserved in the Norman manuscript known as the Madrid Skylitzes (figs. 6, 7; pp. 69, 71). While it is understandable that SPRECHER may have included these pieces in this chapter for the sake of being comprehensive, they do not add anything to his argument. Their presence may be seen as a distraction from SPRECHER's tight textual analysis. They could have easily been removed, allowing for a more streamlined reading.

Another stumbling block is found in Chapter 3, in the discussion of the Limburg Staurotheke. Rarely can one point to a description of an object in a Byzantine text and, with certainty, identify that object with one that is extant. While the Limburg Staurotheke is an exceptional work of art, it cannot be said with certainty where it was housed and how it was used. There are plenty of texts that allude to something like the Limburg Staurotheke, and SPRECHER rightfully brings in those texts in order to situate the object within these ceremonial contexts. It can be suggested that he goes one step too far to argue that the objects described in these texts are specifically referencing the Limburg Staurotheke. For example, the *Book of Ceremonies* describes how on the feast for the Exaltation of the Cross on September 14, a reliquary of the True Cross was brought from the Great Palace to the Sekreton in Hagia Sophia, and then carried by the emperor to the ambo, where it was handed to the patriarch. In this passage, the plural “the precious woods” (τὰ τίμια ξύλα) is used to describe the True Cross (pp. 105–106). SPRECHER argues that this passage is describing the cross in the Limburg Staurotheke because it is constructed of more than one piece of wood (p. 106). But this is the one detail that makes the Limburg Staurotheke unexceptional: Byzantine crosses that were made from relics of the True Cross were typically assembled using more than one piece of wood.⁴ The use of the plural in the *Book of Ceremonies* could also reflect the belief that the cross upon which Christ was crucified was made of three species of wood (cf. Isaiah 60:13); this is an idea that shows up explic-

4. JANNIC DURAND, La relique impériale de la Vraie Croix d'après de Typicon de Sainte-Sophie et la relique de la Vraie Croix du trésor de Notre-Dame de Paris. In : JANNIC DURAND – BERNARD FLUSIN (eds.), *Byzance et les reliques du Christ* (Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, Monographies 17). Paris 2004, pp. 91–105.

itly in the early-twelfth-century epigrammatic poetry for reliquaries of the True Cross by Nicholas Kallikles.⁵ It might be suggested that trying to identify the cross fragment described in the *Book of Ceremonies* with the one housed in the Limburg Staurotheke is a false and – in SPRECHER’s case – an unnecessary argument to make. The reader could become so fixated on this identification that it overshadows SPRECHER’s more valuable contributions regarding the contexts in which the messages of the Limburg Staurotheke were activated.

These criticisms aside, SPRECHER’s book is an important contribution to the study of relics and the ways in which they were used to promote the sacrality of the emperor and his office. It makes ample use of textual, visual, and material sources – an interdisciplinary approach that will benefit historians of all fields.

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Keywords

Byzantine imperial ideology; cult of relics

5. ANDREAS RHOBY, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Ikonen und Objekten der Kleinkunst* (Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung 2). Vienna 2010, p. 176.