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The Costume of the Byzantine Emperors and Empresses

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The Costume of the Byzantine Emperors and Empresses

The first Roman emperors were all members of the senate and continued to belong to it throughout their reigns.¹ All the members of the senate including the emperor wore tunics and togas decorated with a wide purple band, the *latus clavus*, and special footwear.² During the period of instability in the early third century several emperors were selected by the army.³ Initially this shift in power did not affect court ceremony and dress; but slowly both began to change. Court ceremony became more formal and emperors distanced themselves even from senators.⁴ During the late third century, Diocletian introduced the new court ceremony of the adoration of the purple; according to Aurelius Victor, the emperor also wore richly brocaded purple robes, silks and jeweled sandals.⁵ Diocletian's abdication ceremony illustrates that court ceremony and dress often remained very simple. The only garment closely associated with imperial power at this time was the emperor's purple robes. In his *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, Lactantius records that in AD 305 when Diocletian abdicated, the ceremony consisted of the emperor standing under a statue of his patron deity,

¹ Under the law the *Lex Ovinia* (enacted by 318 BC), censors selected each senator according to certain criteria. Since only members of the senate who were expelled for misconduct ever left the senate, the appointment was effectively for life. *OCD*, 1996, 1385.

² *OCD*, 1996, 1386.

³ All of the thirteen emperors except two who ruled during the time period (AD 235-260) were acclaimed by the senate. Grant, 1985, vi.

⁴ Price, 1997, 97.

⁵ Aurelius Victor, 39; Bird, 1994, 41.

Zeus, before the assembled military, then removing his purple robes and finally placing them on the shoulders of his successor.⁶

The primary event which resulted in changes to court ceremony and dress was Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the state religion. The effect of his decision is best illustrated by the emperor's funeral.⁷ Instead of being cremated like every emperor before him, Constantine was interred in a special mausoleum as the thirteenth apostle.⁸ The first part of Constantine's funeral, the procession to the mausoleum led by Constantius II, the emperor's son and successor in the East, followed earlier Roman practices. But once at the mausoleum, the memorial service and interment strictly conformed to Christian practices.⁹ Constantine's funeral represented a decisive break with past Roman ceremony. Its splendor and Christian elements foreshadowed the elaborate court dress, rituals and protocols found in the Middle Byzantine period and best described by the later antiquarian and writer, the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus in his *Book of Ceremonies*. These later ceremonies freely mingled elements from the Roman past with contemporary practices. Instead of identifying themselves with the twelve apostles, future emperors claimed that they were God's representatives on earth and that their earthly courts mirrored the heavenly one.¹⁰ Because the empress' role was initially less well defined, her dress resembled that of other Roman noble women; but beginning with Helena, the first Christian empress, the empress' role and dress slowly changed to reflect her elevated status as the emperor's consort.¹¹

In the *Book of Ceremonies*, the most detailed and accurate record describing court ceremony from the time of Constantine up to the Middle Byzantine period, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, an emperor who not only described court

⁶ Lactantius, XIX; Fletcher, 1867, [8].

⁷ Price, 1987, 99.

⁸ Eusebios, IV, 60, 3; Cameron, 1999, 176.

⁹ Eusebios, IV, 71, 1; Cameron, 1999, 181.

¹⁰ Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, preface, 29-33; Reiske, 1829-30, 2.

¹¹ For a discussion of the empress' role see James, 2001, 36-37.

ceremonial but also participated in it, records that ceremonies could be divided into three types depending upon how frequently they occurred.¹² The first group, which included imperial marriages, baptisms, funerals and coronations, occurred very infrequently. A second group, which included imperial victory celebrations, the reception of diplomats and bestowal of offices, occurred more often. The final, most common group was the religious festivals which followed the liturgical year. Each participant in a Byzantine ceremony wore the costume and accessories dictated by his office; during a single ceremony each individual might change his costume several times.

The garments which each participant wore were part of a highly developed dress code that identified an individual's rank and social status. The splendour and dignity of Byzantine court ceremony so impressed foreigners and instilled a sense of awe in them that they were envied by the whole world.¹³ Depending upon the type of ceremony, emperors wore three types of dress: military costume consisting of a cuirass, helmet and cloak; everyday dress consisting of a *chlamys* and *divetesion*; and finally senatorial dress consisting of a toga. Empresses also wore three types of costumes. Although they never wore military dress and only very occasionally togas, they did wear a highly specialized form of dress during their wedding ceremonies. Initially their every day dress was more conservative and continued earlier forms of Roman dress. The main garments of this costume were the dalmatic tunic and mantle. Then later, as with the emperor, their main type of every day dress was the *chlamys* and *divetesion*.

Such elements as an individual garment's fabric, colour, decoration, and the addition of patches or borders distinguished the emperor and empress from other court members. They were also identified by special accessories such as their crowns, pendalia, fibula, and scepters. It will be the object of my thesis to trace chronologically, on a monument by monument basis, developments in each of

¹² Cameron, 1987, 106, 111-112.

¹³ Ball, 2005, 3.

the three types of dress worn by the first to the last emperor up to the Fourth Crusade. In a second section my thesis will trace developments in the empress' dress during the same time period. The discussion will not only be descriptive but will also analyze the significance of various forms of dress and what these forms revealed about each ruler's beliefs and policies.

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