

# The Preacher and the King: vision and meaning in Atheniensis 211

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*Codex Atheniensis 211 is the earliest surviving illustrated Chrysostomic anthology. Its unique and sophisticated illustration still puzzles and fascinates scholars. The relative chronology of the manuscript fluctuates between the end of the ninth century and the first half of the tenth, while its provenance remains to this day unspecified. In an attempt to illuminate the circumstances of its creation, this study engages with the examination of a unique homily and its illustration. In my view, the people responsible for the selection of the sermon and the design of its illustration conceived it as a meaningful re-contextualization of the homily's original delivery; the historical background of fifth-century Constantinople served as a springboard for the articulation of an eloquent visual comment on current public issues in the Byzantine capital.*

**Keywords:** Codex Atheniensis 211; John Chrysostom; Aelia Eudoxia Augusta; imperial *proskynesis* mosaic; Leo VI; tetragamy incident

One of the earliest illustrated manuscripts preserved in the collection of the National Library in Athens is a unique anthology of homilies attributed to John Chrysostom, the eloquent and prolific preacher and patriarch of Constantinople from 398 to 404.<sup>1</sup>

1 Codex Atheniensis 211: Ethnikê Bibliothêkê tês Hellados (EBE) 211, Diktyon no 2507; A. Marava-Chatzinicolaou and Ch. Toufexi-Paschou, *Catalogue of the Illuminated Byzantine Manuscripts of the National Library of Greece*, III: *Homilies of the Church Fathers and Menologia 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> Century* (Athens 1997), 24–53. The entire manuscript is accessible @ [Πλατφόρμα Ψηφιακών Συλλογών - Εθνική Βιβλιοθήκη της Ελλάδος \(nlg.gr\)](http://www.nlg.gr).

The chronology, provenance, and circumstances of its creation have been debated since its first publication by André Grabar in 1932, when he proposed a date in the tenth century.<sup>2</sup> Initially Grabar put forward the hypothesis of an eastern origin for the book, while later he supported a different view that favoured a provenance from central or southern Italy.<sup>3</sup> His conclusion was prompted by his iconographical and stylistic observations. Subsequent researchers have largely relied on his analysis, but new interpretations have also been put forward.<sup>4</sup> To this day, a secure chronology and the determination of its origin are scholarly desiderata, but equally vivid and stimulating is the discussion on the scribe and the painter.<sup>5</sup> Limitations of space and scope here prevent the detailed exposition of all the different views or the discussion of all issues pertaining to the comprehension of this fascinating early manuscript. Suffice it to mention that its chronology fluctuates from the second half of the ninth century to the early tenth century, while Constantinople and Italy figure prominently as plausible places of manufacture.

Unlike several early Chrysostomic corpora assembled on the basis of a coherent canon with an explicit exegetical orientation, focusing on specific books from the Scriptures,<sup>6</sup> the anthology in Athens presents its reader with a seemingly random

2 A. Grabar, 'Un manuscrit des homélies de St. Jean Chrysostome de la Bibliothèque Nationale d'Athènes', *Seminarium Kondakovianum* 5 (1932), 259–97 [= *L'art de la fin de l'antiquité et du Moyen Age*, 2 (Paris 1968), 804–39].

3 A. Grabar, *Les manuscrits grecs enluminés de provenance italienne IXe-XIe siècles* (Paris 1972), 25–7.

4 A. Xyngopoulos, 'Θεοτόκος ἡ Φωτοδόχος Λαμπάς', *Ἐπετηρίς Ἑταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν* 10 (1933), 321–39, esp. 326; K. Weitzmann, *Die byzantinische Buchmalerei des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin 1935), 57–8; S. Pinto Madigan, 'Athens 211 and the Illustrated Homilies of John Chrysostom', University of Chicago-Illinois, unpublished doctoral thesis (Chicago 1984). I have not been able to get access to this thesis: for a critical synopsis of its results see K. Krause, *Die illustrierten Homilien des Johannes Chrysostomos in Byzanz* (Wiesbaden 2004), 8–10. See too A. Marava-Chatzinicolaou, 'Ἡ μικρογραφία της χαμένης δραχμῆς', *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικῆς Αρχαιολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας*, Περίοδος Δ', 13 (1985–6), 209–14; C. Walter, *Art and Ritual of the Byzantine Church* (London 1982), 85–115; M. Evangelatou, 'Ομιλίες Ιωάννου Χρυσοστόμου', *Το Βυζάντιο ως Οικουμένη. Ὁρὲς Βυζαντίου. Ἔργα καὶ ἡμέρες στο Βυζάντιο*, exhibition catalogue (Athens 2002), nos 38, 107–9; Z. Gavrilović, 'La resurrection d'Adam, une reinterprétation', *Cahiers archéologiques* 27 (1978), 101–15; G. Gasbarri, 'Immagini eloquenti. Nuove osservazioni sul codice Atheniensis gr. 211', in A. Iacobini et al. (eds), *La Sapienza bizantina. Un secolo di ricerche sulla civiltà di Bisanzio all'Università di Roma* (Rome 2012), 295–314; idem, 'Cristo al tempio, Lazzaro, la formica-leone: osservazioni iconografiche su alcune miniature dell'Athen. gr. 211', *Rivista di Storia della Miniatura* 14 (2010), 17–31; idem, 'From margins to frames. Some forms of transmission of visual formulas in Byzantine post-Iconoclastic illuminated books', in A. Milbank (ed.), *Out of the Margins: new ideas on the boundaries of medieval studies* [= *Marginalia* 19 (November 2015)], 51–67; V. Tsamakda, 'The Homilies of John Chrysostom', in eadem (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantine Illustrated Manuscripts* (Leiden 2017), 366–81.

5 S. Pinto Madigan, 'Three manuscripts by the "Chrysostom Initialer": the scribe as artist in tenth-century Constantinople', *Scriptorium* 41/2 (1987), 205–20.

6 See e.g. Ethnikḗ Bibliothḗkē tēs Hellados (EBE) 2651 [Diktyon no 4683], ninth or tenth century, forty-four Chrysostomic homilies on Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians; Ethnikḗ Bibliothḗkē tēs Hellados (EBE) 234 [Diktyon no 2530], tenth century, twenty Chrysostomic homilies addressed to the

thematic selection. In the course of time, it has lost both its opening and its close. Today it comprises forty-two homilies that principally elaborate on moralizing themes and theological issues.<sup>7</sup> The futility of wealth and earthly assets, the value of repentance and almsgiving for the spiritual advancement and eventual salvation of the righteous: these are key motifs surfacing regularly from sermon to sermon. To these we may add doctrinal questions, adhering to a certain theological agenda that quite often resonates polemically either against Christian heretics or against the Jews.<sup>8</sup> Of the forty-two sermons preserved therein and attributed to John Chrysostom, the majority are by his pen, two are pseudo-Chrysostomic and found only in the Athenian codex, while seven homilies have been attributed to other authors.<sup>9</sup> At this point, it is important to mention that, unlike the illustrations, which have monopolized scholarly attention, the principles permeating the selection of the homilies in the Athenian codex have not received the attention they deserve.

All views concur on the fact that this is the earliest surviving testimony of an illustrated Chrysostomic collection. Apart from its early date, it stands out because of its originality and its exquisite art. All the compositions are unique, sophisticated, and classicizing – and above all, they were never copied in the following centuries. The extent of the manuscript's original illustration eludes us. The surviving material, though, constitutes the earliest attempt to illustrate the words of this emblematic hierarch. Later, from the eleventh century onwards, compositions inspired by biographical accounts of John would appear in Chrysostomic collections;<sup>10</sup> yet these were not illustrations of the sermons *per se*. In its current state, the Athenian manuscript features fifteen narrative compositions, several decorative arrangements, and some simpler headpieces. The perfection of the draftsmanship and the apparent

people of Antioch; Ethnikê Bibliothêkê tês Hellados (EBE) 243 [Diktyon 2539], tenth century, thirteen Chrysostomic homilies on the Gospel of Matthew; Ethnikê Bibliothêkê tês Hellados (EBE) 263 [Diktyon no 2559] dated to 991, Chrysostomic homilies on various apostolic epistles. See also W. Mayer, 'John Chrysostom', in K. Parry (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics* (Oxford 2015), 141–54, esp. 143–4.

7 All the homilies are numbered. The codex opens with the final page of homily νς' (56) and terminates at homily ρ' (100). Homilies νς' (57) and νη' (58) appear in perturbed sequence. Homilies ξα' (61) and ξβ' (62) are missing. In all probability the book originally opened with homily 51 (να') and was part of a two-volume Chrysostomic anthology which has not survived intact.

8 For example, a series of six homilies in the second half of the codex are dedicated to the inexplicable nature of God (*De incomprehensibili Dei natura*) and against a fourth-century heresy, Anomoeanism (*Contra Anomoeos*). See R.J. Laird, 'John Chrysostom and the Anomoeans: shaping an Antiochene perspective on Christology', in W. Mayer and B. Neil (eds), *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Berlin 2013), 129–49.

9 See the detailed exposition of its content @ Pinakes: Diktyon no 2507.

10 A. Xyngopoulos, 'Άγιος Ιωάννης ο Χρυσόστομος "Πηγή Σοφίας"', *Αρχαιολογική έφημερίς* (1942–4), 1–36, esp. 14–15; C. Walter, 'The Three Hierarchs', *Revue des études byzantines* 36 (1978), 250, 253; Krause, *Homilien*, 2, 92, 97, 100 and *Divine Inspiration in Byzantium: notions of authenticity in art and archaeology* (Cambridge 2022), 149–74.

references of the iconography and style of execution to the art of late antiquity unfailingly impress anyone who leafs through its pages.

Without exception, the narrative compositions and decorative patterns are distinctive. They are varied and freely executed on parchment, exclusively around the title of each homily in impeccable pen-drawing and with the same light-brown ink used by the scribe for the text. The confident and agile drawing confirms the painter's undisputed talent. The colouring is minimal and wisely distributed in order to highlight garments and to enhance the plasticity of the flesh, especially of faces, hands and feet. The palette is plain and limited: green, red, and blue pale watercolours.

Certain homilies have been chosen to receive unassuming decoration: the title is defined neatly by narrow headbands combining geometric and vegetal ornament.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere we come across improvisations that combine vine sprouts with antique vessels.<sup>12</sup> Similar vegetal elements are employed regularly in narrative scenes in order to mediate a scenery for the action.<sup>13</sup> In several instances the titles are enclosed within variously rendered crosses.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, decorative frames comprise a distinct and especially impressive category.<sup>15</sup>

With regard to the narrative illustration, this talented miniaturist rendered his images with delicacy and sensitivity, conveying the spirit of the text with economy. Each picture is carefully assembled *ad hoc* by the essential pictorial motifs selected from different visual contexts. Their content is inspired either by the title of the sermon or by the opening lines of the homily proper, and therefore a parallel reading of words and images is mandatory for the reader/viewer to grasp the full meaning of each composition. As has been noted,<sup>16</sup> our miniaturist is especially keen on the illustration of rhetorical contrasts and metaphors, resulting in scenes with parallel or antithetical arrangement.<sup>17</sup> Another recurring compositional principle is the circular display of individual pictorial details.<sup>18</sup>

The variety of the modes selected for the decoration of the opening of all the sermons is impressive and at the same time puzzling. No doubt, practical reasons, and especially the challenge of navigating through the pages of this sizeable anthology, must have dictated such a mnemonic mechanism reminiscent of bookmarking. A telling example will suffice to illuminate my point. Towards the closure of the codex and between folios 264r and 310v, we find a series of six homilies dedicated to the inexplicable nature of God and against the Anomoeans – a fourth-century heresy that represented

11 See ff. 8v and 49v.

12 See ff. 19r and 43v.

13 See ff. 53r and 119r.

14 See ff. 38r, 155v, 212v and 234r.

15 See ff. 217v, 190r and 67v.

16 Marava-Chatzinicolaou and Toufexi-Paschou, *Catalogue*, 48.

17 See ff. 31v and 56r.

18 See ff. 34v, 84v, 110v, 119r and 226r.

an extreme form of Arianism.<sup>19</sup> The title of the first homily is enclosed within an impressive ciborium-like construction, which singles out the sermon, marks the beginning of the series and brilliantly promulgates Christian values by way of a visual *pars pro toto*: the ciborium for the entire Church.<sup>20</sup> The titles of all five following sermons are enclosed within equally impressive decorative frames reminiscent of precious opus sectile on church walls and floors.<sup>21</sup> In this way the designer of the illustration managed to clearly indicate a section of the anthology with strong theological overtones that the reader is visually instructed to handle as a distinctive subdivision.

Moreover, taking under consideration the singularity of all options and more precisely the meaningful distribution of the images within the book, I am convinced that neither the homilies nor their individual decorations were selected randomly or lightly. On the contrary, they must have been employed in order to promote a distinct agenda and an explicit objective that complied with the wishes, needs, and tastes of a specific audience. Some homilies were clearly valued more highly than others. Following the traces of these unique choices, that is unique sermons and singular images, it might help us sketch more clearly the profile of the original user or users of this fascinating early book. Taking my cue from Leslie Brubaker's meticulous study of ninth-century visual communication,<sup>22</sup> I am equally inclined to see images as indices of socially constructable meaning and as constructors of social meaning. Recurring patterns in both verbal and visual communications are indeed our best guide to how images could work and how people could understand.

In an attempt to illuminate these questions, I will focus upon a single case that stands out for both its text and its illustration. The specific homily is indeed very rare: it survives in the Athenian codex and another manuscript of the eleventh century, today in the Vatican.<sup>23</sup> The historical setting of the sermon's original delivery is adequately documented. Between 400 and 402, John Chrysostom delivered two sermons at the martyrrium of St Thomas at Drypia, a location that has yet to be securely identified.<sup>24</sup> According to Raymond Janin it was a rural suburb in the south west of Constantinople outside the Theodosian walls and along the Via Egnatia.<sup>25</sup> The

19 See note 8 above.

20 See f. 264r.

21 See ff. 271v, 280r, 286v, 295r and 305v.

22 L. Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium. Image as exegesis in the homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge 1999), 19.

23 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ott. Gr. 431, Diktyon no 65674, 11th century; PG 63, 473–78: Τοῦ αὐτοῦ. Τῇ ἐπιούσῃ ἡμέρᾳ, παραγενομένου τοῦ βασιλέως ἐν τῷ μαρτυρίῳ τοῦ ἀποστόλου καὶ μάρτυρος Θωμᾶ τοῦ διακειμένου ἐν τῇ Δρυπίᾳ, καὶ ἀναχωρήσαντος πρὸ τῆς διαλέξεως, ἐλέχθη ἡ ὁμιλία μετὰ τὴν ἀναχώρησιν τὴν ἐκείνου πρὸς τὸ πλῆθος.

24 J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth. The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (New York 1995), 140–1; W. Mayer and P. Allen, *Chrysostom* (London 2000), 21–2.

25 R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzantin, première partie: Le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat oecuménique: Les églises et les monastères* (Paris 1969), 251–2. For a different identification

occasion calling for the preacher's eloquence was the celebration of the *Day of the Martyrs*, a feast augmented by the ceremonial deposition of new relics arriving in the Byzantine capital at the initiative of Empress Aelia Eudoxia (395–404) who at the time maintained cordial relations with the patriarch.<sup>26</sup> The three martyrs whose relics were deposited at Drypia remain anonymous, but there is a strong case for identifying them with Sisinnius, Martyrius, and Alexander, early martyrs of Cappadocian origin. All three had been brutally put to death in the region of Trent in northern Italy in 397, while preaching to the pagans in the Alps. Bishop Virgilius of Trent, who received their ashes, had written to John promising to send him some relics.<sup>27</sup> With Chrysostom's consent, the Augusta organised a two-day celebration that included a vigil and a long torchlight litany across the city, starting from Hagia Sophia and terminating at Drypia. The first homily was solemnly delivered right after the end of the litany, in the presence of Eudoxia and the people of the city.<sup>28</sup> The festivities culminated the next day with a second homily addressed to the flock, after the departure of Emperor Arcadius (395–408) and his military escort.

As noted by Gilbert Dagron,<sup>29</sup> religious processions of this type in the city of Constantine during the first centuries were distinctively unlike the imperial triumphs of Roman times. Although they often took the emperor or the empress, following the same route on foot, to the important sacred sites within the city walls or outside the city, during these religious pageants in particular, the triumphal character was reversed: the emperor representing God's divine order on Earth, had to renounce his elevated status and humble himself before God.

This idea is beautifully visualized in the unique composition illustrating Chrysostom's second homily at Drypia contained in Atheniensis 211 on folio 63r (Fig. 1). A haloed emperor crowned with a diadem surmounted by an emblematic cross and dressed in a sumptuous cloak, adorned with dotted cruciform patterns, kneels submissively as he throws himself at the feet of a group of three anonymous martyrs. His hands are hidden under his mantle in an ambiguous gesture that conveys adoration and supplication. On the right, the scene is framed by a slender cypress tree that rises directly in contact with the emperor's red slippers. The composition is crowned by a vine shoot terminating in a bunch of red grapes.

According to Anthony Cutler and Leslie Brubaker,<sup>30</sup> the elucidation of meaning and signification permeating a wide range of postures and gestures – from humble bowing to genuflection and submissive prostration – that were employed by the Byzantines after the

of the site with modern Bağcılar on the European side of Istanbul see A. Külzer, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*: Band 12, *Ostthrakien* (Vienna 2008), 340.

26 K.G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses. Women and imperial dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1982), 56–8.

27 Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 140, n. 75.

28 On this homily and its translation see Mayer and Allen, *Chrysostom*, 85–92.

29 G. Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale. Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451* (Paris 1974), 102.

30 A. Cutler, *Transfigurations. Studies in the dynamics of Byzantine iconography* (Philadelphia 1975), 53–110 and esp. 74; L. Brubaker, 'Gesture in Byzantium', *Past and Present* (2009), Supplement 4, 36–56, esp. 41–7.





Figure 1 EBE 211, fol. 63r. An anonymous emperor prostrating at the feet of three anonymous martyrs (by the permission of the National Library in Athens)

end of Iconoclasm in varied ritual and devotional performances, is no easy task. Gestures and postures mattered, and their charged choreography did not necessarily assign a single meaning to a particular move. So, context is pivotal in the process of unravelling the transformation of the elusive posture of *proskynesis* from the pragmatic into the symbolic.

In our miniature specifically, Cutler identified a reverential *hapax*,<sup>31</sup> a case in which the artist was faced with a dilemma of priority: the problem of demonstrating reverence paid to a group of saints rather than an individual martyr. In the end the idea of the imperial *proskynesis* prevailed, with the consequence that the figures to whom this reverence was principally offered were literally set aside. However, apart from the decoding of the king's bodily attitude, there remains another crucial and perplexing

31 Cutler, *Transfigurations*, 74.

issue that needs to be addressed: the explication of his unmistakable facial likeness to the representation of another kneeling ruler in a roughly contemporary work of monumental art.<sup>32</sup>

Normally, all imperial figures in our manuscript are depicted in accordance with a formulaic physiognomic type that privileges round faces, short hair, and short rounded beards. They are all crowned and invariably wear the paludamentum clasped on the shoulder with a fibula. If the emperor's facial features and imperial apparel on folio 63r were rendered in the generic manner that we typically come across in our manuscript, and indeed if he did not stand out for his undeniable facial resemblance to the imperial figure performing an analogous prostration in the mosaic panel that adorns the Royal Gate in the narthex of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (c. 912) (Fig. 2),<sup>33</sup> then the interpretation of this particular representation would have been straightforward. We would be talking about a literal illustration of the sermon's title – *On the Day of the Martyrs in the presence of the King* – and we would recognize the Emperor Arcadius in *proskynesis* in order to receive the divine grace of the martyrs. However, this is not the case here. The prostrate emperor in the Athenian manuscript is individualized. More precisely, he bears very specific features that vividly recall the physiognomy, stance, and apparel of the anonymous imperial figure in the mosaic panel of Hagia Sophia (Figs. 5 and 6). A well-modelled oblong face with clearly outlined eyebrows, eyes and nose, distinctive lips beneath a drooping moustache and an oblong beard of medium length bifurcated at the centre of the chin, is crowned with long hair. This facial type markedly deviates from the imperial formula recycled in the illustrations of the specific codex and is reminiscent of the so-called 'portrait coins' of Leo VI (886–912), Romanos I (920–944) and Constantine VII (913–959).<sup>34</sup> Such a distinctive deviation must have been purposeful and certainly must have carried profound significance. In my view, the people who designed the illustration here conceived of it as a meaningful re-contextualization of fifth-century events; the historical context of the sermon's original delivery served as a springboard for the

32 This likeness has been reported by Grabar, 'Un manuscrit', 280; Marava-Chatzinicolaou and Toufexi-Paschou, *Catalogue*, 49; A. Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantine* (Paris 1936), 100–6; N. Oikonomides, 'Leo VI and the Narthex Mosaic of Saint Sophia', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 30 (1976), 151–72, esp. 172.

33 Th. Whittemore, *The Mosaics of Saint Sophia at Istanbul. The Mosaics of the Narthex* (Oxford 1933), 17–20; E.J.W. Hawkins, 'Further Observations on the Narthex Mosaic in St. Sophia at Istanbul', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 22 (1968), 162–4. The bibliography on the interpretation of this emblematic composition is vast, for a synopsis of the scholarly discussion see R. Franses, *Donor Portraits in Byzantine Art. The vicissitudes of contact between human and divine* (Cambridge 2019), 63–86; A. Walker, 'The Emperor at the threshold. Making and breaking *taxis* at Hagia Sophia', in S. Tougher (ed.), *The Emperor in the Byzantine World* (London 2019), 281–321.

34 See H. Maguire, 'Earthly and Spiritual Authority in the Imperial Image', in K. Mitalaitė and A. Vasiliu (eds), *L'icône dans la pensée et dans l'art* (Turnhout 2017), 177–95, esp. 185 and nn. 33–5.





Figure 2 Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. A view of the royal *proskynesis*-mosaic (photo by Steven Zucker, PhD)

articulation of an eloquent visual comment on current public issues in the Byzantine capital.

In fact, if we turn to the crowned figure on folio 56r (Figure 3) leading a small group of righteous Christians that Chrysostom exhorts to partake into two banquets simultaneously – a literal one of earthly delicacies and an allegorical one of divine nourishment resulting from the heavenly inspired prophetic words –<sup>35</sup> it is clear that here the designer of the illustration was not interested in identifying the ruler with a specific person. What distinguishes him from the rest is the gesture of speech he directs to the hierarch across the altar and the imperial insignia, namely his crown and the paludamentum – the military chlamys clasped on the right side with a fibula. Compared to him, the features of the emperor in *proskynesis* on folio 63r appear consciously customized, as if they were meant to identify a specific individual. In my mind this obvious similarity between two almost contemporary works of art – our miniature on the one hand and the mosaic panel in Hagia Sophia on the other – is not accidental and therefore it would be wrong to bypass it without further consideration.

35 Marava-Chatzinicolaou and Toufexi-Paschou, *Catalogue*, 29–31.



Figure 3 EBE 211, 56r. Two parallel banquets (by the permission of the National Library in Athens)

Another indicative case of a royal model that stands out in stark contrast to the virtuous emperor will further underscore the talent of the miniaturist and his ability to adjust the imperial formula meaningfully within varied visual contexts. On folio 132v (Fig. 4) at the opening of the sermon dedicated to the moral value of repentance,<sup>36</sup> Herod and John the Baptist, the devious king is represented seated on a throne as he witnesses the abominable outcome of John's beheading. Directly across Herod the parchment has been excised, and, judging by the outline of the hole, we may safely assume that there it must have appeared the head of the Baptist on a disc. It might have been Salome presenting it to the king, or even Herodias herself. Herod embodies an anti-hero, the stereotype of the immoral and decadent

36 Marava-Chatzinicolaou and Toufexi-Paschou, *Catalogue*, 39–40.



Figure 4 EBE 211, fol. 132v. Herod (by the permission of the National Library in Athens)

king, a fact visualized brilliantly in a series of iconographical details: his crown remains without a cross, and his halo is distinctively coloured sky-blue. This is the only figure in the entire manuscript that bears a coloured halo. Finally, it is worth mentioning that his face has received targeted attacks that have left traceable marks.

Leaving images aside for a moment, I suggest we briefly turn to the homily and its content. The sermon is dedicated to the power of the martyrs and further elaborates on the concept of man's reconciliation with death in anticipation of the spiritual rewards the righteous will receive in heaven.<sup>37</sup> Unlike Chrysostom's first homily at

37 PG 63, cols 473–8.





Figure 5 Detail of the imperial figure in EBE 211, fol. 63r (by the permission of the National Library in Athens)

Drypia, which was delivered in the presence of the empress and sounded more like a panegyric,<sup>38</sup> the second one contained in the Athenian codex is rather introverted and loaded with soteriological overtones. Right from the beginning the emperor and his military escort are praised for their humility. By escaping the vainglory of worldly power, pride and ostentation, they will reap their reward in heaven through the intercession of the martyrs. Death, unknown to God's creatures before the fall, was taught to Adam and Eve by the Creator Himself through the fratricide. The heroes of the Old Testament such as Enoch, Noah, Jonah, and Elijah, prefigured through their example salvation from death and thus offer comfort and hope to the believer. The sermon ends with an interesting address to the 'philosopher and the sublime one',<sup>39</sup> for whom the hierarch's admonitions are unnecessary, since he already knows the magnitude of the heavenly kingdom and realizes the vanity of earthly pleasures and temptations.<sup>40</sup> Undoubtedly, the spirit of the homily leaves an

38 See note 28 above.

39 PG 63, cols 476d–477: Ὁ μὲν γὰρ φιλόσοφος καὶ ὑψηλὸς οὐ δεήσει τῆς ἐντεῦθεν παραίνεσεως, ἀλλ' ἐννοήσας ἡλίκον ἐστὶ βασιλεία οὐρανῶν, μᾶλλον δὲ πρὸ τῆς βασιλείας τῷ Θεῷ συγγίνεσθαι καὶ μετὰ Χριστοῦ εἶναι (τοῦτο γὰρ βασιλείας ἀπάσης μείζον), οὐδενὸς αἰσθήσεται τῶν παρόντων ἡδέων, ἀλλ' ἀτιμάσει ταῦτα, τῆς σκιάς αὐτὰ μᾶλλον παρατρέχων.

40 At this point it is important to note that Leo VI had the reputation of a *sophos* in his own lifetime. The epithet *wise* was emphatically linked to his name as a defining feature of his public image. See S. Tougher,



Figure 6 Detail of the emperor in the *proskynesis*-mosaic (reproduced from T. Whittemore, *The Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul. Preliminary report on the first year's work, 1931–32. The mosaics of the narthex* [Oxford 1933], Pl. XXI – on public domain @ <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.55204>)

aftertaste of mortality and an odour of death. Perhaps for this very reason, the laconic composition illustrating this sermon and mediating visually the entreaty of the king is meaningfully framed by the lofty cypress tree: it points elegantly upwards, towards the heavenly kingdom that both the ‘wise philosopher’ of the sermon and the kneeling emperor of the image anticipate vehemently.

The combined reading of word and image supports the hypothesis that the imperial *proskynesis* depicted here was not exclusively intended as a literal illustration of the historical event of the fifth century. Instead, it may have constituted a nuanced and

*The Reign of Leo VI (886-912). Politics and people* (Leiden 1997), 110–32 and M.L.D. Riedel, *Leo VI and the Transformation of Byzantine Christian Identity. Writing of an unexpected emperor* (Cambridge 2018), 118–21.



updated reading of the past event as well as a representation that wished to convey a very personal message. The cypress tree growing at the feet of the emperor is not a random pictorial choice in order to balance the composition: it is the visualization of wishful thinking. Taking into consideration the soteriological overtones permeating the sermon of the eloquent preacher, the historical background of its delivery, and the regal authority communicated by both the verbal and the visual discourse, I am inclined to propose that the emperor depicted here is not a stereotypical figure. On the contrary, this ruler must have been very real and dear to the commissioner of the manuscript and most probably already dead when the codex was created. Whoever decided to enclose the individualized depiction of this particular ruler within the pages of this book sincerely wished to convey a positive commemoration of him; a commemoration that vividly recalls a visual prayer. In order to achieve this, he purposely selected this rare and highly charged homily and meticulously designed and personalized its illustration.

In autumn 1950, a young Cyril Mango published a Byzantine funerary inscription kept in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul and dated to precisely 903.<sup>41</sup> The inscription invokes the good will of the anonymous holy martyr as well as God's grace, and records the planting of cypress trees to the fair memory of Arsavir.<sup>42</sup> The deceased, in whose memory the planting took place, was of Armenian origin, head of the imperial bodyguard and diplomat of the ninth century.<sup>43</sup> According to Mango, the custom of planting cypress trees in both Christian and Ottoman cemeteries to this day has Byzantine roots. They believed that the resinous fragrance of the tree would help to dispel the odour of mortality.<sup>44</sup> More importantly, though, the auspicious upward growth of the tree was homeopathically equated with the soul's favourable *transitus* to the other world. Arsavir's funerary inscription from the early tenth century leaves no room for doubt that this belief goes back in time, and this strengthens our suggestion that the use of the cypress tree in this particular composition was purposeful and meaningful.

41 C. Mango, 'The funeral tree: A newly-discovered Byzantine inscription from Istanbul', *Archaeology* 3.3 (September 1950), 140–1.

42

With the good will of the holy Martyr  
and the grace of God these cypress trees  
were planted in the year 6411 to the fair  
memory of Arsavir, the pious imperial  
spatharius and gentleman of the bedchamber

43 N. Drocourt, 'Travellers, diplomats, interpreters and others: agents of political relations', in N. Drocourt and S. Kolditz (eds), *A Companion to Byzantium and the West, 900–1204* (Leiden 2022), 419–45, esp. 423.

44 The association of the cypress with funerary practices was not unknown to the Romans: A. Giesecke, *The Mythology of Plants: botanical lore from ancient Greece and Rome* (Los Angeles 2014), 120–1; C. Connors, 'Seeing cypresses in Virgil', *The Classical Journal* 88.1 (1992), 1–17. See also the story of Cyparissus' perpetual mourning in Ovid: A. D. Melville (tr.), *Ovid. Metamorphoses* (Oxford 1986), Book X:106–42, 228–9.

In summary, I strongly believe that the likeness of the emperor at the feet of the martyrs in our manuscript (Fig. 5) with the anonymous emperor at the feet of the enthroned Christ in the mosaic panel of Hagia Sophia (Figure 6) is not accidental. It is unlikely that the miniaturist of the Chrysostomic anthology came up with such a unique composition spontaneously by his own initiative. Instead, he must have had thorough instructions to follow a given model. He might even have seen with his own eyes the monumental composition adorning the cathedral of the Byzantine capital. Therefore, if the mosaic panel is dated approximately to the first quarter of the tenth century, then the Athens Chrysostom must have been created around the same time. I am also willing to endorse the view of all those who have so far argued for a Constantinopolitan origin of the book,<sup>45</sup> despite the fact that there are several issues that still complicate matters and prevent the unreserved acceptance of such a proposition.<sup>46</sup> Finally, if the emperor who humbles himself at the feet of Christ in the narthex of Hagia Sophia has indeed appropriated the physiognomy of Leo VI,<sup>47</sup> Leo the Wise, then likewise, I would be willing to identify the same emperor in the Athenian manuscript.

Moving a step farther and maybe overstretching the limits of an educated guess, I would venture that there exist some intriguing historical coincidences linking the fifth-century events to those of the early tenth century. Despite his charisma in preaching and his undeniable talent in administering the church, Chrysostom is notorious for his scepticism and ascetic suspicion of women. In his eyes, they are by nature shallow, disobedient, malevolent. When in positions of authority, they would insinuate themselves because of their vanity and abuse of power. Aelia Eudoxia fitted this biased image promulgated by the hierarch nicely.<sup>48</sup> The vitriolic criticism that he exerted upon her conduct in the Byzantine court and public space have gone down in history.<sup>49</sup> When he even went so far as to overtly call her Herodias and Jezebel, both proverbial embodiments of queenly evil, Eudoxia demanded the patriarch's dethronement and exile. John's removal caused upheaval in the Byzantine capital, as the flock rallied behind their beloved hierarch.

At the beginning of the tenth century the Byzantine capital became the backdrop of an equally loud and long-lasting scandal, which involved the patriarch Nicholas I

45 Weitzmann, *Buchmalerei*, 57–8; Marava-Chatzinicolaou and Toufexi-Paschou, *Catalogue*, 47–50; Pinto Madigan, 'Three manuscripts by the "Chrysostom Initialer"', 205–6, n. 7; Gasbarri, 'Immagini eloquenti', 302–3.

46 Palaeographical, iconographical, and stylistic evidence that complicates the attribution of this codex to a certain locale is addressed in detail in a forthcoming publication of mine.

47 Oikonomides, 'Leo VI and the Narthex Mosaic', 158–61.

48 Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 48–78, esp. 70–8.

49 J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose and John Chrysostom. Clerics between Desert and Empire* (Oxford 2011), 231–47. See also W. Mayer, 'Media Manipulation as a Tool of Religious Conflict: Controlling the Narrative Surrounding the Deposition of John Chrysostom', in W. Mayer and B. Neil (eds), *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Berlin 2013), 151–68.

Mystikos (901–925) and the imperial couple, Leo VI and Zoe Karbonopsina (906–912). The tetragamy affair, namely the crisis caused by Leo's uncanonical fourth marriage in 906, threatened the Constantinopolitan church with schism, and resulted in the patriarch's exile. In the end the emperor was granted a dispensation but had to do penance.<sup>50</sup> In my mind, it would not have been a far-fetched scenario if someone from within the Patriarchate or from the monastic institutions of the capital had recognized the similarities and decided to exploit them in the design of this unique Chrysostomic anthology. For the late emperor the designer of the illustration reserved a privileged spot, at the feet of the martyrs and at the roots of the slender cypress tree. For Leo did repent!

Such deliberate revisiting of past events was not uncommon. A famous historical precedent of the late fourth century that nuances meaningfully the events related to the tetragamy incident and its reverberations – St Ambrose (339–397) denying access into the church to Emperor Theodosius I (347–395),<sup>51</sup> and imposing upon him a public penance – was evidently well-known to Leo's contemporaries, who did not fail to draw conclusions.<sup>52</sup>

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50 For the details of this incident see Oikonomides, 'Leo VI and the Narthex Mosaic', 161–70; Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, 110–63.

51 N. B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan. Church and court in a Christian capital* (Oxford 1994), 291–8; J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose and Chrysostom. Clerics between desert and empire* (Oxford 2011) 89–91

52 See Oikonomides, 'Leo VI and the Narthex Mosaic', 170, n. 77.