ICONOGRAPHY OF PERSUASION: RE-EVALUATING EMPRESS IRENE IN HER NUMISMATIC CONTEXT

by

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Abstract

Empress Irene (r. 780-802 CE) is a contentious figure in Byzantine history. On the one hand, she is well-known for the restoration of icon worship at the Council of Nicaea in 787; on the other hand, she is notorious for blinding her son, Constantine VI at Constantinople in 797. Most importantly, she became the first female emperor of Byzantium. The problem in understanding this figure is that the narratives about her have been built from biased, historical texts, such as that of Theophanes the Confessor writing in the early ninth century. This thesis seeks to shift the discussion from the literary to the material. Coins are an often-neglected form of primary evidence in Byzantine studies. I argue that coins and their iconography have the ability to make important claims about power in the Byzantine world.

The data for this thesis comes from the well-established collection at the American Numismatic society and from the Rachel and David Herman Collection of Byzantine Coins at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology, whose specimens I am the first to research and analyze since their donation in 2015. Through an in-depth analysis of the iconography employed on Irene’s coinage and the variations which occur across the gold and bronze denominations, I demonstrate clear evidence for imperial tailoring of these numismatic images in order to communicate degrees of authority to the varying audiences of coin users. This underutilized form of evidence offers a closer connection to the imperial perspective regarding a ruler’s authority. As such, the coins enable us to see an official view in which Irene gradually ascended to sole rule and represented as a traditional Byzantine emperor. The numismatic evidence presents an alternative picture of Irene, independent of the historiography.
Lay Summary

This thesis has two primary goals: to restore coins in discussions of power at its claims in the Byzantine world, and to use these coins as primary evidence to re-evaluate our understanding of Byzantine Empress Irene (r. 780-802 CE). Historical sources, replete with biases, tend to dominate these discussions of Byzantine history. Coins offer a different lens: that of the imperial authority. While certainly a bias of its own, I argue that we cannot understand the power dynamics at play in Byzantium without embracing its officially issued coinage. Contrary to the literary narrative constructed about Empress Irene, the coinage does not show any of the events considered central to her history. Rather, the coins reveal the official view of Irene as essentially a traditional Byzantine emperor who ascended to her position as the first female emperor of Byzantium in a gradual manner.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, N. Inglot.
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1. Introduction

The year is 797 of the common era. It is the Saturday morning of August 15th. Emperor Constantine VI is trapped in the Porphyra at Constantinople, when the supporters of his mother, Empress Irene, brutally blind him. "It is in this manner his mother Irene acceded to power," Byzantine monk, chronicler, and iconophile Theophanes the Confessor records in the first quarter of the ninth century.\(^1\) It is this turning point in Byzantine history which most distinctly characterizes the narrative constructed around Empress Irene, who reigned from 780 to 802 CE, into the present. First serving as co-regent on behalf of her young son and heir, Constantine VI, Empress Irene ascended to the Byzantine throne in the year 780 – albeit with a brief period of exile between 790 and 792 – until the blinding incident in 797. Then, Irene proceeded to sole rulership for another five years until 802.

This thesis aims to restore coins, in particular the visual evidence they provide, to discussions of power and its claims in the Byzantine world. Byzantine history tends to focus on these sorts of textual accounts and anecdotes, sometimes spinning them in different directions. For example, Empress Irene has variously been hailed as a feminist icon and a religious hero, or she has been cast as a ruthless usurper. These views have been built primarily from textual accounts of her reign, replete with their own problems and biases. Much of an emperor’s authority derives from how he – and later, she – is represented visually. Therefore, we cannot understand the power dynamics at play in Byzantium without embracing its officially issued coinage. This method is especially critical since Irene is the first empress to appear on Byzantine imperial coinage in nearly 150 years.\(^2\)

\(^1\) AM 6289.
\(^2\) Kotsis 2012, 188-192.
Coins certainly carry an imperial bias, even if we do not know the extent of a ruler’s influence on coin production. What I seek to do is to take an underutilized form of evidence to give us insight into construction of Byzantine power and authority, according to the imperial perspective. In the case of Irene, the coins illustrate a slow transition of her power from co-regent to sole emperor, as opposed to the usurpation described in scholarship. This material lens is one of my key contributions to the field, as it highlights the official, imperial perception of Irene as an increasingly powerful ruler. This approach is instrumental to a holistic understanding of historical figures more broadly. Coins have rarely been looked at this way.

Theophanes’ *Chronographia* serves as the primary account on Irene’s reign, as he was contemporary with the empress.\(^3\) The writings of George Synkellos and St. Theodore the Studite are among some of the others available. These Byzantine religious figures portray Irene somewhat positively for her role in the restoration of icon worship. In addition, Arabic Islamic sources, such as Mas'ūdi, also refer to Irene among their Byzantine king lists, without much stigma surrounding the blinding or the fact that she was a female emperor.\(^4\) How impressions of Irene became so polarizing in modern scholarship is difficult to discern, but I suggest that the trajectory of the narrative may not have become so skewed had scholars paid more attention to evidence beyond the literature. Byzantine material culture has often been relegated to subservient status compared to texts, and this thesis seeks to restore the value of the visual in our overall understanding of Irene.

General volumes on Byzantine history and art provide solid overviews of the rulers and the types of images that may appear on coins, but numismatic evidence is often

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\(^3\) Mango & Scott 1997, v. His chronicle extends from 284/5 to 813 CE, and is largely based on earlier histories, except for 602 to 813, where his sources have been otherwise lost.

\(^4\) El-Cheikh 1997, 243-244.
overshadowed by other visual media, such as painting or mosaics. Iconographic studies of coins which do exist tend to focus on a specific attribute and trace it throughout the whole of Byzantine history. While these visual surveys are valuable, what is lost here is the application of these iconographic features in specific reigns and what they can tell us about the messages rulers might send to subjects via the coins. The works in which we see coinage at the forefront peaked in the 1970s, with a focus on categorizing, typologizing, and valuing the coins. Although the identification numbers provided by such catalogues help streamline the coin identification process, none of these volumes truly aim to interpret their specimens. The only comprehensive work on coin iconography from a specific reign is that of James D. Breckenridge, published by the American Numismatic Society in 1959, entitled *The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II (685-695, 705-711 A.D.)*. It provides a useful framework for thinking about the iconography and coinage of Constantine VI and Irene.

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7 Warwick Wroth’s *The Catalogue of the Imperial Byzantine Coins in the British Museum* (1908) is perhaps the earliest of these prolific works. Hugh Goodacre’s 1957 *A Handbook on the Coinage of the Byzantine Empire* – although somewhat outdated now – was the first of these typologies outside of a specific collection. Beginning in 1966, the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies published its first of five volumes of *The Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*. The volume with which I am concerned in this thesis is number three, *Leo III to Nicephorus III (717-1081)*, compiled by Philip Grierson in 1973. Philip Whitting’s *Byzantine Coins* was published as a more condensed catalogue, also in 1973. David Sear’s 1974 (and later 1982 edition) *Byzantine Coins and Their Values* offered a pared-down taxonomy with a special emphasis on quality, fineness, and estimated value for these Byzantine coins. Grierson’s 1982 *Byzantine Coins* attempts to bridge the gap between Byzantine history and numismatics slightly more in a relatively similar catalogue as before; it is the last of these large, numismatic taxonomies.

8 Justinian’s placement of Jesus Christ on the obverse of several issues of his coins are the sort of iconographic details whose influence is worth tracing, as the ramifications of this numismatic shift were still felt strongly in the Isaurian period, when the Isaurian dynasty’s founder, Leo III (717-741), instigated the movement against the veneration of all religious icons.
although I wish to take it a step further and restore the agency and value of coins as active participants in shaping that history.

Methodology and evidence: Irene as case study

Coins have a unique ability to produce history. Where historical sources record history through the veil of authorial interpretation and bias, coins offer a closer connection to the imperial perspective. As this medium represents the emperor in an official capacity, the coinage minted under an emperor can thereby make claims regarding his or her power and perpetuate those authoritative claims in a way that other forms cannot. With literacy in antiquity being by no means universal, the written accounts could not have been accessible to all audiences. Similarly, art may or may not have reflected imperial aims, and works erected throughout Byzantium may have also posed barriers to viewership. These considerations are especially vital when examining Irene because figural art commissions declined significantly during the iconoclast era to which she belonged, for fear of icon veneration. Therefore, coins provide the most accessible form of imperial representation in this period, making them an invaluable resource for a numismatic study of the Isaurian dynasty (717-802).

Irene serves as a compelling case study because she is such a contentious figure, who has been read in different ways rooted in text-based histories in modernity. Women’s history and gender studies picked up on Irene’s unique role as the first female Byzantine ruler, as part of a movement in the field during the late 1990s and early 2000s.9 As a result,

9 Lynda Garland’s *Byzantine Empresses* (527-1204) gives a thorough, albeit negatively biased, narrative of Irene. Sear’s “Irene of Athens, Empress of Byzantium” (2001) is a dramatic telling of the historical events. Judith Herrin’s *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (2001) examines influential empresses in Byzantine history, concentrating on their feminized roles and expectations as wives, mothers, and religious patrons. Liz James’ *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (2001) is commendable in that her chapter on Irene derives from a numismatic lens and conducts some iconographic analysis, with a primary emphasis on Irene’s titles as a formulation of power.
the anti-image sentiments of the iconoclast movement, combined with the historiography of Byzantium, seem to impact the use of coins as corroborative evidence instead of the primary evidence. It is necessary to reassess Irene through the iconography of her coinage, in context with her recent and distant Byzantine imperial precedents. A few scholars have probed this direction,\textsuperscript{10} with Kriszta Kotsis being the closest to hitting the mark. Her 2012 article “Defining Female Authority in Eighth-Century Byzantium: The Numismatic Images of the Empress Irene (797-802)” attentively considers the iconography of Irene’s coinage, but it focuses on the \textit{solidi} of Constantinople and on the feminine elements of Irene’s constructed power. In many ways, my work builds on Kotsis’ by filling in the denomination gaps and expanding the discussion beyond her status as a woman, in order to see that Irene’s representation was drawn not from female authority but from the traditional imperial iconography available to her.

Using a material perspective, my iconographic study of the coinage issued throughout both of Irene’s reigns paints an alternate picture of the empress than traditionally offered. In my thesis, I use a series of coins primarily from the American Numismatic Society and the David Herman Collection at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology to demonstrate the changes and continuities in the iconography employed on her coinage – both co-regency and sole reign – and to explore the ways in which these numismatic features reflect degrees of imperial audience targeting, through a denominational analysis. I propose that Irene’s tenuous position as co-regent required constant negotiation and visual reiteration before she could even consider ruling on her own.

\textsuperscript{10} Cécile Morrisson approaches this contextual understanding of Irene’s coinage in her 1984 article “L’impératrice Irène,” which compares the numismatic evidence to the historical events, making iconographic notes in light of those connections, but she occasionally gets bogged down in the narrative. Also, this article briefly touches on “the political function of the coin as a vehicle of the imperial image” (120) but unfortunately does not explore this point much further. Castrizio’s “La Propaganda Dinastica Sui Nomismata Degli Imperatori ’Isaurici’” (1993) comes closer to that persuasive analysis, but the article considers the Isaurian dynasty more broadly and is too short to examine the co-regency coins in any depth.
Even so, once sole rule had been secured, her coinage draws on very traditional elements of Byzantine imperial representation in order to highlight continuity with the past. This interpretation stands in contrast to the usual view of Irene’s solo coins, in which the gold ones are perceived to be drastically unusual for depicting her portrait on both sides. While the dual-sided portrait of the living emperor is rather unprecedented, I argue that the iconography employed on her coins represent Irene as a truer Byzantine ruler than her co-regency coinage ever did.

I strive to move away from the typical discussion of Irene, wherein the issues are discussed in purely sequential terms. This chronological organization is logical and necessary for large catalogues, such as the *Dumbarton Oaks Catalogue*. However, the scholarship has not moved much past this chronological approach, since the coins are used to complement the historical narrative. That being said, it is important to note that our dating of these issues is rooted in the chronology established by Grierson in the *DOC*, which appears to derive largely from the historical record. As we are dealing with such a tight period in time for Irene’s reign, independent dating methods, such as hoard studies, are difficult to conduct. Therefore, I fully acknowledge that my study enters with these chronological assumptions based on a textually-established framework.\(^{11}\) Neither my divisions of the co-regency coinage into pre-, during, and post-exile issues nor my chronological speculation of the solo coinage at Syracuse can escape this established system of dating. On the other hand, as will become apparent throughout this thesis, these divisions definitively reflect observable iconographic shifts that visually distinguish each type from another, regardless of the dates to which we assign these changes.

Each of my chapters analyzes a new issue of coinage throughout Irene’s time in power. These issues are distinguished by clear iconographic alterations, and for each issue

\(^{11}\) To tackle this framework goes beyond the scope and ability of available evidence in this thesis.
of *solidi*, I discuss the corresponding issue of *folles*, where available. These divisions also correspond with Grierson's class-based issues, and I shall reiterate that the iconographic changes which define these classes are observable regardless of the historical record. For each chapter, I launch into the historical context surrounding each issue of coinage. While this organization may be interpreted as falling into the historical narrative trap, instead I maintain that by placing this information at the forefront, readers shall find themselves situated in the events of the period, only to find how little of that historical information actually appears in the numismatic record. As such, this structure reiterates the need to treat the coins as evidence in their own right, and how the narrative they provide does not necessarily corroborate the historical narrative.

The majority of content in this thesis focuses on the co-regency coinage of Irene and Constantine VI, minted between 780 and 797. The first chapter analyzes the first co-regency issue, Class Ia, or what I call the pre-exile coins. It delves into a discussion of the iconography and its precedents, as well as how the images constructed compare to earlier patterns of co-emperor portraiture. The second chapter follows up with the Class Ib issue, or exile coins, in which the portraiture is similar enough to be grouped with the previous issue yet contain slight iconographic shifts to suggest Irene's loss of power. The third chapter still belongs to the co-regency, although the portraits of Constantine VI and Irene are now on opposing sides, rather than both on the obverse. Grierson deems this issue as Class II; I also refer to them as post-exile, seeing as Irene's *globus cruciger* – an orb topped with a cross – makes a re-appearance following her return to power. The fourth and final coinage chapter draws on the iconographic discussions of the previous chapters in order to demonstrate which numismatic patterns Irene's solo coinage maintains and which it modifies for the purpose of indicating her new position. Now that Irene was ruling as sole emperor, her numismatic iconography needed to convey this unprecedented authority in a way that coin-using audiences could observe and perhaps even accept. This chapter also
necessitates a slightly different structure, in that during Irene’s sole reign, a mint is reopened at Syracuse on the island of Sicily which produces two issues of *solidi*, but no *folles*. Moreover, all of the coins illustrate that Irene’s authority within – and subsequent takeover of – the co-regency is more nuanced than the literature traditionally portrays. Ultimately, I offer a more holistic understanding of this iconic empress, by bringing forth a fresh, denominational perspective that treats coins for the accessible, mobile disseminators of information they are.

Overview of Byzantine coinage

Before analyzing coinage under Irene, it is worth reviewing the types of coins produced in Byzantium and how they circulated. Like their Roman predecessors,¹² the Byzantines utilized the traditional metals of gold, silver, and bronze in their coin production. However, the Byzantine Empire adopted a new currency consisting of the *solidus*, *miliaresion*, and *folles*.¹³ The gold *solidus* (plural, *solidi*), or what the Byzantines called the *nomisma*, formed the economic standard, in which seventy-two coins were struck from a pound of gold.¹⁴ Therefore, taxes and other types of significant payment would have been made in *solidi*.¹⁵ On the other hand, the silver *miliaresion* that developed in the eighth century was thin and known for its whole-sided coin inscription--a feature likely derived from the Arab *dirham*.¹⁶ *Miliaresia* seem to have been issued in fewer numbers than *solidi*, and for more ceremonial purposes.¹⁷ Furthermore, the bronze *follis* (plural, *folles*) was a large coin with a value of

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¹² For more information on Roman coins, see Mattingly, Harold. *Roman Coins: From the Earliest Times to the Fall of the Western Empire*. London: Methuen, 1960.
¹³ Grierson 1982, 1.
¹⁴ Sear 1974, 45.
¹⁵ Herrin 2001, 76.
¹⁶ Goodacre 1957, 12; Whitting 1973, 47-8; Grierson 1982.
¹⁷ Herrin 2001, 76. *Miliaresia* were minted under the co-regency, but none under Irene’s sole reign are known. Since they do not contain portraits, they are not a focus of my study.
forty *nummia* as expressed by an ‘M’ on the reverse,\(^{18}\) which changes in prominence depending on which busts are included on Isaurian reverses. Since the value of the bronzes fluctuated, it is difficult to discern how much they could buy or how exactly they related to *solidi*.\(^{19}\) *Folles* would have circulated most commonly as the everyday currency.\(^{20}\)

We have no remaining Byzantine mints or mint documentation,\(^{21}\) and money was hardly discussed in Byzantine literary sources.\(^{22}\) Coinage was produced throughout the Byzantine Empire at various points, but the eighth century had experienced a general reduction in mints, with the primary one being Constantinople.\(^{23}\) The Roman system of moneyers and senatorial approval no longer applies clearly to Byzantium. As such, we can only speculate about agency in Byzantine coin design and the extent of influence rulers would have had with the types analyzed here. While these details limit a complete understanding of coin production in Byzantium, archaeological information can fill in some of these gaps. Metcalf posits that based on other sparse ninth-century hoard evidence, provincial coins likely circulated for around thirty to fifty years and that *solidi* remained in circulation very briefly as tax payment or for a while as savings.\(^{24}\) His excavations at ninth-century occupation layer of Corinth in central Greece suggest that between 775 and 820, approximately ten to fifty million Constantinopolitan *folles* circulated, with few of these landing in Corinth.\(^{25}\) Therefore, it seems that almost all of these *folles* were minted at, and circulating within, the Constantinople metropolitan area. As such, constructions of imperial

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\(^{19}\) Metcalf 1973, 200.

\(^{20}\) Herrin 2001, 76.

\(^{21}\) Grierson 1982, 19.

\(^{22}\) Grierson 1982, 19.

\(^{23}\) Irene reactivates the mint at Syracuse during her sole reign, but so far as we know only *solidi* were struck, and the paucity of known specimens also suggests minimal circulation at this time.

\(^{24}\) Metcalf 1967, 274. Silver *miliaresia* pose a greater challenge, in that they are not considered valuable enough to hoard but precious enough not to be lost often.

\(^{25}\) Metcalf 1967, 307. Similarly, we have few specimens from Asia Minor, including Pergamum, Priene, Sardis, and Burdur.
authority on coins distributed targeted messages to a localized general public. The imagery which appears on the coinage of Irene was, for the most part, intended to persuade audiences near the capital.

2. Visual authority prior to Irene’s exile (780 - 790)

Introduction

The coinage of the co-regency demonstrates the nuanced modes by which power and authority were negotiated from the very beginning. It allows us to see the ways in which numismatic iconography is used to negotiate and advertise continuities, distinctions, and overlaps of imperial authority between Constantine VI and Irene, as well as with preceding rulers. The coins of this co-regency fall within the general pattern set by the Isaurian dynasty, but the iconographic transformations which occur give us a crucial baseline for what happens afterwards. One of the striking new features of coinage in this era is the image of an empress: Irene is the first to be represented in nearly a century and a half.

Empresses do not appear on coins between 491 and 565, and we only have five cases between 565 and 641: Sophia, Anastasia, Constantina, Leontia, and Martina, accompanying their imperial family members.²⁶ My collections include examples of Sophia (573-578) with Justin II and Leontia (602-610) with Phocas (Figs. 1, 2). The most recent instance prior to Irene was Martina, wife of Emperor Heraclius’ (610-641), whose representation was limited to the bronze. Further back still, Empress Ariadne (474-515), wife of Zeno and Anastasius I, was the most recent empress to strike gold coinage under her name.²⁷ All of these

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²⁶ Kotsis 2012, 190-1.
²⁷ Grierson 1973, 337. See also Kotsis 2012, 188-192.
precedents highlight the novelty of Empress Irene’s representation on gold and bronze coinage and ability to strike both denominations under her name.

This chapter specifically focuses on the coins dated 780-790, prior to Irene’s exile, or the Class Ia issue as Grierson defines them. In general, Class I coins contain an obverse of the facing busts of Constantine and Irene and a reverse of the seated figures of Leo III, Constantine V, and Leo IV.28 Most simply, the subclass Ia is characterized by Irene holding the *globus cruciger* and by the beginning of the inscription on the reverse. Grierson states that this series was essentially a continuation of the previous reign,29 but as we shall see, this definition is perhaps too reductive. Here, too, I set up the iconographic and denominational approach which I will take to analyzing each series of coins throughout the following chapters. In treating these coins as primary sources, I read each iconographic attribute as a key component to the story, which I hope to develop beyond the literary narrative by demonstrating visual exchanges of imperial power and authority between the two rulers.

Historical context behind the coins

The year 780 was not the first time Constantine VI stepped up to the Byzantine throne. His father, Emperor Leo IV the Khazar,30 who had been co-emperor since 75131 and senior Augustus since 775,32 suffered from poor health, which required that he arrange for his young son’s succession shortly after assuming the throne. Therefore, five-year-old Constantine VI was crowned as his father’s co-emperor on Easter 776.33 The significance of this date for his coronation, according to Judith Herrin, would have indicated to the

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28 Grierson 1973, 337.
29 Grierson 1973, 337.
30 Due to his mother’s nationality: Goodacre 1957, 146.
31 Theophanes AM 6241.
32 Theophanes AM 6268; Garland 1999, 73-4; Sear 1974, 258.
33 Theophanes AM 6268; Garland 1999, 74; Goodacre 1957, 146.
Byzantines that the Son of God was being presented to the world. This implicit connection endowed Constantine with religious authority, sanctioned by God. Added to the ceremonial vows was the stipulation that all subjects must accept no one but Constantine and his descendants as emperor. This component of the coronation was intended to prevent Leo’s younger half-brothers from obtaining the throne, who undoubtedly would have fought for their claims to power. Therefore, this strategic action immobilized opposition, meanwhile strengthening the credibility of the shared authority of Leo and Constantine. Together, both of these factors surrounding young Constantine VI’s formal rise to power succeeded in establishing him as the true religious and dynastic heir of Byzantium.

Remarkably, by the age of five, Emperor Constantine VI possessed an inconceivable amount of authority over the Byzantine Empire. He and his father only ruled together until 780, when Leo IV died, thus rendering Constantine a nine-year-old emperor. However, Constantine could not succeed the throne in his own right because he was still a minor. He would not be eligible to rule alone until age sixteen, generally considered the age of majority in Byzantium. This fact will play a significant role in the power tensions represented on coins throughout the following chapters. To compensate for Constantine’s youth, a co-regency was established. Constantine’s mother and Leo IV’s recent widow, Irene the Athenian, took up this new role of co-regent. That an empress could serve as regent for

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35 Qtd. in Garland 1999, 74 and Goodacre 1957, 146. See Theophanes AM 6268.
36 See Theophanes AM 6268.
37 Garland 1999, 75 references a rumor from Theophanes that “Leo had died of a fever contracted after wearing the jewelled crown from the Great Church, dedicated by Herakleios or Maurice” and speculates whether Irene could have been involved and/or circulate this story. See Theophanes AM 6272.
38 Garland 1999, 1; Hennessy 2008, 25. See also Theophanes AM 6282. Age sixteen is a generalization; inconsistencies certainly occur, although they do not detract from the fact that Constantine VI ruled long enough to have outgrown the need for his mother as regent.
39 Theophanes AM 6261; Garland 1999, 73-4. Leo IV and Irene married in Constantinople in 769.
40 Theophanes AM 6273.
her young son was not unprecedented in Byzantium,\textsuperscript{41} but regencies generally concluded once the male heir came into majority.

Hennessy states that although the need for a regent was not specified by law, the establishment of a regency also depended on how able the heir was to govern and how suitable his guardian was.\textsuperscript{42} The fact that coinage was minted in both of Constantine and Irene’s names indicates that this relationship was fully recognized by the state. However, where their shared power becomes rare is in its length and its unbalanced nature. Their co-reign lasted for seventeen years, until Constantine was twenty-six, well past his majority age. This detail will be especially critical as I analyze the iconographic features of his shared coinage with Irene.

In the second year of the co-regency, Irene had dispatched messengers to Charlemagne, king of the Frankish kingdom in the West, in an effort to arrange a marriage between her son Constantine and Charlemagne’s daughter, Rotrud.\textsuperscript{43} Additionally, the co-regency experienced peace with their Arab neighbors in 782/3.\textsuperscript{44} Theophanes records a conversation between Irene and the holy patriarch Paul in 784, in which Paul leaves his position in favor of the monastic life and urges the empress to reconsider the imperial stance on icon worship.\textsuperscript{45} Regardless of the veracity of this exchange, that same year Irene proceeded to appoint the new patriarch Tarasios. Together, Irene and Tarasios sent letters to Pope Hadrian and encouraged Church leaders to attend the synod which they were organizing to discuss the icons.\textsuperscript{46}

The Seventh Ecumenical Council was held at Nicaea in 787 by Tarasios and more than 300 bishops. The site of Nicaea was located near Constantinople, but it was distant

\textsuperscript{41} Such as with Martina and the sons of Heraclius.
\textsuperscript{42} Hennessy 2008, 25.
\textsuperscript{43} Theophanes AM 6274.
\textsuperscript{44} Theophanes AM 6275.
\textsuperscript{45} Theophanes AM 6276.
\textsuperscript{46} Theophanes AM 6277-6278.
enough to be in a region controlled by one of Irene’s loyal officers and thus provide a feeling of safety. In addition, this location was meant to evoke the memory of the first historic Council of Nicaea of 325 under Constantine the Great, which had established a uniform Christian doctrine.\textsuperscript{47} Certainly, those in attendance made the connection between the figurehead of the First and Second Councils of Nicaea, as the two co-regents were later hailed as New Constantine and New Helena.\textsuperscript{48} This council did not introduce new doctrine, but denounced iconoclasm in a decree which was then signed by Constantine VI and Irene in Constantinople.\textsuperscript{49} Herrin states that Irene signed this Declaration of Faith before Constantine,\textsuperscript{50} an action which would suggest Irene’s notable precedence over her son’s authority. Furthermore, these events would serve to distance the imperial position from iconoclast predecessors and thereby regain support of those who still favored icon veneration.

The following year, Irene is said to have broken off Constantine’s engagement to Charlemagne’s daughter Rotrud, and instead arranged for him to marry Maria of Amnia in 788, although this marriage would not last.\textsuperscript{51} In Theophanes’ account, Irene had authority such that she could interfere so invasively in her son’s affairs, but it is difficult to know with certainty the agency Irene could have had within these matters based on the text alone. It is events such as these that could have contributed to the strained relations of power that play out during the co-regency. However, it is vital to note that neither these marriage troubles nor the religious changes are reflected in the numismatic record specifically. That being

\textsuperscript{47} Noble 2009, 75. See also Herrin 2001, 87-8.
\textsuperscript{48} Kotsis 2012, 201; Noble 2009, 150.
\textsuperscript{49} Theophanes AM 6280.
\textsuperscript{50} 2001, 87-8.
\textsuperscript{51} Garland 1999, 80-1; Goodacre 1957, 149-50; Herrin 2001 91. My sources disagree as to the motives behind these arrangements, and intensive speculation regarding those decisions goes beyond the scope of this material-based paper.
said, the unfolding of these political events could, in turn, affect how the pre-exile coins were interpreted by various audiences.

Attribute of Position

Leo IV and Constantine VI

The coins of Constantine VI and his father, Leo IV, set the tone for the co-regency, particularly with respect to Constantine’s visual representation. Before investigating the coins that are the primary focus of this chapter, it is worth viewing coins from this brief reign, which immediately preceded the co-regency. Curiously, scholars agree that no coins are known to have been issued during the first few months of Leo IV’s reign, prior to his son’s coronation.\textsuperscript{52} Rather, the earliest coins of this joint reign are dated to 776.\textsuperscript{53} This observation would seem to indicate that Leo and Constantine’s imperial authority was stronger, and certainly more visible, together. Two classes of \textit{solidi}, with corresponding classes of \textit{folles} were minted under the co-emperors. The first class consists of portrait busts of the two rulers, whereas the second class depicts them seated on a double-throne\textsuperscript{54} (Figs. 3a, 4a). Likewise, both classes follow the format common for the period, with portraits of the two living co-emperors on the obverse and portraits of the former Isaurian emperors – here, Leo III (717-741) and Constantine V (741-775) – on the reverse\textsuperscript{55} (Figs. 3b, 4b).

The first, and perhaps most easily noticeable, feature of this set of coins is the positioning of the two rulers. Leo IV occupies the viewer’s left as senior \textit{Augustus}, while Constantine VI is located on the right-hand side as junior \textit{Augustus}, as was customary in

\textsuperscript{52} Grierson 1973, 325.
\textsuperscript{53} Goodacre 1957, 147; Grierson 1973, 325; Grierson 1982, 158.
\textsuperscript{54} Whitting 1973, 167; Grierson 1982, 158.
\textsuperscript{55} Goodacre 1957, 147; Whitting 1973, 167; Grierson 1973, 9; Grierson 1982, 158.
Byzantine numismatic portraiture56 (Figs. 5a, 6a). Constantine’s position on what would be Leo’s left naturally emphasizes his youth and junior status as co-emperor. It is appropriate that this organizational layout is maintained in the second class as well, even as the emperors are now seated upon a throne (Figs. 3a, 4a). Grierson suggests that this change in portraiture from busts to seated figures celebrated the co-emperors’ victory against the Arabs in 778 by placing the two emperors in a new, prominent position facing the crowd at each other’s side.57 These patterns are maintained across the *solidi* and *folles*, thus reiterating the imperial message. Indeed, Byzantine audiences may have been familiar with the junior and senior imperial positions and the authority associated with those poses. The shift from bust to enthroned would certainly have been apparent, regardless of public understanding of military events.

**Constantine VI and Irene on the obverse**

For the purposes of discussing imperial positions, Class Ia and Ib coins are essentially the same. The layout of portraiture follows the typical pattern for Isaurian dynasty coinage, in which the co-ruling emperors are depicted side-by-side on the obverse of both *solidi* and *folles* (Figs. 7a-10a).58 Also in keeping with tradition, Constantine is located to the viewer’s left in the ‘senior’ position, while Irene is placed on the viewer’s right as a mark of her position as ‘junior’ emperor. This observation is significant for several reasons. There is little doubt about the way Byzantine coin users would have interpreted these portrait placements – Constantine is clearly intended to be shown as ‘senior’ emperor. As such, this position inherently grants this child an extraordinary amount of authority, which is being perpetuated to the coin-using public. Furthermore, Constantine’s position to the left implies that he is not

56 Grierson 1973, 110.
58 Brubaker 2012, 77.
only the new senior *Augustus*, but that he has also subsumed his father’s senior role. In the span of four years, young Constantine has succeeded in transitioning from junior to senior emperor.

Conversely, Irene’s location in the ‘junior’ position may then reflect an imperial statement on her perceived power. She was not granted priority as ‘senior emperor’ on these coins, despite being older and more capable to rule than her nine-year-old son. Indeed, many catalogues such as the *DOC* and *ANS* list these coins by their senior emperor, with less emphasis on the junior colleague. The title *Augusta* did not inherently grant Irene the ability to mint coinage, so perhaps her subordinate position is merely a reflection of that rank. It was, however, possible for a woman to mint coins as a colleague, as in Irene’s case, but this point sets up the unusualness of her individually-minted coins during her sole reign later on. As we have no direct evidence that rulers participated in coin design, we cannot know whether one co-regent had more influence than the other. Nor can we know whether those involved in coin production placed Irene in the junior position in keeping with tradition and/or because they believed the empress to have less authority than a child. Where earlier examples of Byzantine empresses and colleagues occur, such as on the coins of Justin II and Phocas, the empress is placed in this same junior position, so perhaps this format was merely picking up on the most recent traditions (Figs. 1, 2).

Ultimately, what matters is that Irene as *Augusta* appears on coins of the co-regency, and ancient – as well as modern – audiences need not understand the empress’ minting influence to surmise the magnitude of her visual presence.

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59 Grierson 1973, 10.
Isaurian ancestors on the reverse

The Class I coins maintain the dynastic tradition of depicting the deceased Isaurian emperors on the reverse. These three seated figures include Leo III, Constantine V, and Leo IV⁶⁰ (Figs. 7b-10b). However, the number of portraits has grown significantly since the beginning of the dynasty, to the point that the reverse has essentially reached its capacity for generational portraiture. This class of coins would be the last of the Isaurians to contain so many effigies, as will become apparent later on. Therefore, the fact that Irene’s portrait is included among the limited space, even if only as ‘junior emperor,’ demonstrates that her representation was deemed important enough for display. Her presence among the dynastic figures also emphasizes her role as an actively-ruling empress among the Isaurians, rather than portraying her in a strictly maternal role.

Attribute of Inscriptions

Two overt features of the inscriptions present on the coins of the co-regency are the lettered denominational marks and the legend descriptions. Although visibly apparent, the key distinction when viewing these inscriptions is, in fact, where they appear. Denominational marks only appear on the folles, while the written descriptions appear exclusively on the solidi. These observations may be linked to the audiences who would have used them. For instance, the common public using the folles in their daily transactions may have had greater concern for the guaranteed value of their currency than for imperial titular inscriptions. The solidi, on the other hand, tended to be more stable in value and may have been directed at a more elite, literate faction of society. These patterns occur on all issues of the co-regency coinage and play an essential role in the way audiences perceived the messages of the coins they encountered.

Most noticeably, the lettered marks comprise a large ‘M,’ which denotes a value of 40 *nummi* (Figs. 8b). Given that the *follis* was the only bronze denomination issued at this time, this mark of value is largely decorative, although it still ensures a specific value backed by the issuing authority. Directly below the large ‘M’ is the letter ‘A,’ which may be an imitation of a mint mark or *officina* letter.\(^61\) To the left and right of that central ‘M’ are the letters ‘X’ and ‘N,’ respectively. These are remnants of regnal year dates, which had once been common on imperial coinage, beginning in the twelfth year of Justinian I’s first reign (538/9 CE, r. 527-565) (Fig. 11). Earlier in Byzantine history, all of these marks would have carried necessary informational weight, but by the late-eighth century, they had essentially become design accessories.\(^62\) Although these markings are rather ancillary in this period, the main takeaway is that they serve primarily to identify the reverse of bronze coins. These letter marks become even more important for discussion throughout the post-exile issue.

The *follis* are particularly useful in understanding certain kinds of inscriptions, but they do not contain descriptive titulature. Thus, the legends on the *solidi* offer a different sort of numismatic illustration regarding the power imbalance between Constantine and Irene. Even more instrumental is the fact that, unlike the reverse *follis* marks, the *solidi* inscriptions change throughout the issues. Although the historical record informs our modern interpretation of these inscriptions, the apparent shifts across issues would be noticeable to a literate audience regardless of their knowledge of current events. Grierson cites the inscription on this first set as beginning on the reverse, naming Constantinos and alluding to his role as *basileus*. He describes a model inscription as: “(Rev.) *CONSTANTINOS c’Δ’* (Obv.) *S IRINI AVI’ MI’ AVTOV*” which can, and do, vary.\(^63\) (For specific examples of Class Ia inscriptions, refer to Table 1).

\(^{61}\) Grierson 1973, 77.
\(^{62}\) Grierson 1973, 190.
\(^{63}\) Grierson 1973, 338.
The inscription arrangement would seem to be indicated by the ‘S’ at the beginning of Irene’s legend, as an abbreviation for the Greek και, which had begun to replace the Latin et.64 These coin inscriptions certainly reflect the influx of Greek into Byzantine script and culture at this point in time. Furthermore, Grierson adds that this unusual placement potentially secured the empress’ name on the supposedly more prominent obverse.65 Indeed, these inscriptions are frequently difficult to discern due to completeness, quality of striking, and general legibility over time,66 all of which may have contributed to overall perception of – or lack thereof – Irene’s authority on the obverse.

The inscription then continues onto the obverse referring to Irene and her roles as Augusta and Mother.67 (See Table 1). The former title was bestowed upon her by her deceased husband, Leo IV in 769, shortly after their wedding.68 Imperial wives were not automatically ranked as empresses or augustae; the emperor could decide whether or not to endow his wife with this title. It is also compelling that Irene’s Augusta abbreviation comes exclusively before her Mother title in that this arrangement emphasizes the empress’ political persona first. On the other hand, where visible, it would appear that Irene’s Augusta title is commonly abbreviated to ἄβρ, which in turn devotes more space to spelling out Irene’s title of mιθρ.69 Where her title does appear more complete as ἄβρ’ἄβ, this spelling indicates that her title was intended to be the Latin form, despite the use of the Greek r.70 As coin space is extremely limited, the letters that appear are strategic in conveying the imperial

64 Grierson 1973, 189.
65 Grierson 1973, 337. This notion of the obverse as the “more honorable position” is a perception linked to the die engraving methods and striking practices for either side of the coin. The obverse is produced from the lower die, which did not wear out as quickly as the upper reverse die, and so could afford to be more intricately incised.
68 Theophanes AM 6261.
69 Whiting 1973, 167 states that the inscription should be read as ἁ[τ[ι] ῶ[π]ρ[α], “with Eirene revered mother.” This translation has not been picked up by subsequent scholars, as other specimens contain fuller spellings (see Table 1).
message, and so may suggest that Irene’s role as Mother may have been considered more important due to its more frequently complete spelling. Additionally, these titles get abbreviated in different ways which do not appear to affect the meaning as a whole. Moreover, these inscribed legends may speak to an authoritative preference of one of Irene’s roles over the other, although the subtleties among these nuanced differences do not entirely survive into present interpretations.

Attribute of Dress

Prior to Constantine VI and Irene

Constantine VI and Irene are represented wearing the traditional Byzantine imperial costumes of *chlamys* and *loros*, respectively, but where and when these costumes appear prior to and during the co-regency requires some attention. I refer again to the coinage from Leo IV and Constantine VI’s joint reign to demonstrate that on the obverse, both emperors wear the *chlamys* (Figs. 3a-6a). This garment is a long, purple cloak that would have been embroidered or decorated with patterned *tablia* cloths, and it would have been fastened by a *fibula* at the right shoulder. This cloak is derived from the *paludamentum* worn by Roman soldiers, and as such, maintained a military connotation into the Byzantine period (Fig. 12).

The *chlamys* later became associated with Byzantine ceremonies, most notably for the emperor’s coronation and funeral. Due to its connection with the coronation ceremony, portrayal in the *chlamys* may also symbolize continuity of imperial power through a securely established dynastic lineage.

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71 Grierson 1982, 30.
72 Ball 2005, 30.
73 Moffatt and Tall 2012; Ball 2005, 30.
On the reverse of Leo and Constantine’s coinage, the former Isaurian emperors wear the *loros* (Figs. 3b-6b). This garment is a large, consular robe that signified Jesus’ wrappings and thus the emperor’s religious authority. The symbolic implications of this costume are markedly different from the *chlamys*, which was connected to the imperial coronation ceremony, in contrast to the *loros*’ sacred function. In addition, the *loros*, which was based on the Roman toga, would have been wrapped around the body, rather than fastened at the shoulder. As time went on, the garment evolved into a long scarf decorated lavishly with jewels (Fig. 12). Furthermore, as the most revered imperial garment, the *loros* was worn on rare occasions such as Easter, the highest Byzantine religious holiday. Consequently, the difference in imperial costumes represented on the coins may serve to visually distinguish the living emperors from the dead.

*Chlamys*

Moving on to the co-regency coinage, the *chlamys* makes a more visually prominent appearance. It is important to note that the young Constantine still wears the *chlamys*, just as he had worn it as ‘junior’ emperor on joint coinage with his father (Figs. 3a-8a). This vested continuity across reigns maintains a degree of stability as the transmission of power occurs. Indeed, the *chlamys* emphasizes Constantine’s coronation as hereditary heir, since the costume would have been worn at his ceremony. Furthermore, that visual consistency becomes even more critical on the co-regency issues as Constantine moves toward ‘senior’ emperor. Constantine takes his father’s place on the coins and is thus represented in the costume appropriate for a senior *Augustus*.

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74 Whitting 1973, 296.
75 Whitting 1973, 297; Grierson 1982; Ball 2005, 12.
76 Ball 2005, 16-17.
Perhaps more important still is the numismatic shift on the co-regency coins, on which the deceased Isaurian emperors now don the *chlamys*, as opposed to the *loros* as they had on the issues of the previous reign. Accordingly, this switch in garments illustrates the beginning of imperial experimentation with Isaurian numismatic traditions early in the co-regency. Therefore, not only is Constantine visibly linked to his father, but he is now also clearly connected to his ancestors in such a way that solidifies his power and seniority within the co-regency.

*Loros*

Curiously, Irene is never depicted wearing the *chlamys* but instead wears the *loros* (Figs. 7a, 8a). Grierson describes it as the “normal costume of an empress.” There are two significant problems with this claim: this shift does not occur until later in Byzantine history, nor do we have any recent numismatic representations of empresses to corroborate. Kotsis cites the most relevant numismatic portrait for comparison with Irene as that of Western Roman empress Licinia Eudoxia from 439 to 455, on account of her facing bust, consular dress, crown type, and insignia. The earlier issue shows the empress in the *chlamys*, whereas the later issue depict her in an early *loros* (Figs. 14, 15). Similarly, Sophia (573-578) and Leontia (602-610) both wear what appears to be the *trabea*, or a predecessor of the *loros* (Figs. 1,2), although evidence for depictions of men in the *loros* appear more contemporary to Irene. Such representations can be found on the coins of Justinian II (Figs. 16, 17) or Isaurian ancestors Leo III (717-741) and Constantine V (741-775) on the coinage.

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77 1973, 123.
78 Such as with Theodora, Thecla, Anna, and Anastasia on the solidi of Theophilus, and with Theodora and Thecla on solidi of Michael III. The *loros* takes on a new form beginning on the *solidi* of Zoe and Constantine VII (Grierson 1973, 123).
80 Kotsis 2012, 195-6 concedes to the time gap between Eudoxia and Irene, but she maintains that Eudoxia’s coins could have reached Constantinople and ultimately serve as potential prototypes for Irene, in absence of more contemporary examples. I do not deny the possibility, but this explanation seems unlikely to be the primary source of inspiration.
of Constantine VI and his father (Figs. 3b-6b). Thus, Grierson’s comment on this dress as typical for empresses does not appear to hold up substantially. In fact, Irene seems to be the first Constantinopolitan to wear the loros in its full form, which indicates a substantial shift in imperial visual authority.

On the other hand, Grierson brings to the fore an argument that the loros ought to be placed above the chlamys in importance, as it was commonly worn in mosaics – an important public art form – and was the religious costume often worn by Justinian II on his Christ coinage (Figs. 16, 17). At the same time, this garment’s later appearance as a common costume for junior emperors in the eighth and ninth centuries suggests that perhaps the loros did not retain that full importance. Although I do not find the artistic argument particularly convincing, the religious connection is more compelling, since this dress would have been worn during the most sacred Byzantine religious occasions. It is possible that Irene set some of the trends that Grierson has identified: Irene is represented in a traditionally male, consular outfit of high status, and in doing so, sets a precedent for female and junior colleagues alike. Moreover, this costume shift may serve to visually distinguish Irene from her son meanwhile associating her with earlier representations of her dynastic predecessors.

Facial Hair

Facial hair may not be the first iconographic feature to come to mind when studying Byzantine coins, yet on the co-regency coinage it provides a compelling lens for comparing Byzantine imperial authority. At this point in Byzantine history, whether or not a ruler wore a beard in real life, all male emperors were represented with beards. Facial hair often served to distinguish the older emperor from the younger, even if it might simply be a thickening of

82 Grierson 1973, 112-3.
the jawline and a modest mustache.\textsuperscript{83} This pattern is evident among the portraits of the Isaurian ancestors (Figs. 3b-6b). Likewise, on the coinage of Constantine and his father Leo IV, the beard marked Leo’s seniority over Constantine’s youth\textsuperscript{84} (Figs. 3a-6a). Similarly, the absence of Constantine’s beard early on in the co-regency is not entirely surprising, as the emperor was still a child. However, the absence of Constantine’s facial hair has greater implications throughout the rest of the co-regency as he ages.

Crown

A discussion of Byzantine imperial dress would be incomplete without an examination of a universally-recognized symbol of power, the crown. The Byzantine crown has also been referred to as a diadem. Originally distinct, these two symbols for victory and sovereignty became synonymous in the Byzantine Empire.\textsuperscript{85} This jewelled diadem was initially worn exclusively by the \textit{Augustus} on coins by Constantine the Great from 325 onward\textsuperscript{86} (Fig. 18). In the latter half of the fourth century, this form of the tied, jewelled diadem was a complete part of the imperial costume.\textsuperscript{87} Empresses would be represented in the jewelled diadem at the very end of the fourth century, with Flacilla, the wife of emperor Theodosius I (379-395) (Fig. 19), although the evolution of late Roman empress’ headdress would not be complete until the time of Galla Placidia (423-437).\textsuperscript{88}

Although as the coin portraits developed from profile busts to frontal – rendering the ribbons indiscernible – the Byzantine imperial crown evolved into a round \textit{stemma}

\textsuperscript{83} Grierson 1973, 110.
\textsuperscript{84} Grierson 1982, 153.
\textsuperscript{85} Ball 2005, 13; Grierson 1982, 30; Morrisson 1978, 763.
\textsuperscript{86} Morrisson 1978, 757.
\textsuperscript{87} “By the reigns of Valens (c.328–378) and Valentinian I (364–375)”: Rousseau 2004, 6. Diadems in this form were worn until the reign of Justinian I (527-565).
\textsuperscript{88} Rousseau 2004, 9. Here can also be found a more complete description of an empress’ diadem at this stage.
headpiece decorated with rows of jewels and/or a central cross. This style remained fairly constant in representation down to the end of the ninth century. Both Leo IV and Constantine VI wear this crown on their joint coinage (Figs. 3a-6a). The former emperors are represented wearing it on the reverses of the Leo and Constantine as well as of the co-regency coins (Figs. 3b-8b). Thus, it is noteworthy that Constantine continues to wear this crown type on all issues and denominations of the co-regency because it positively links him to a strong ruling tradition.

However, the Byzantine crown could also be elaborately pointed and occasionally had *pendilia*, or hanging pendant pearl-like pieces, attached to the sides. It is this style of crown that Irene wears, strongly contrasting with that of her Isaurian contemporaries (Figs. 7a, 8a). These *pendilia* strands likely developed from the ribbons of the earlier diadem.

Western Emperor Honorius (395-423) was depicted wearing a diadem with the first instance of hanging *pendilia*, a trend which is picked up by subsequent emperors (Fig. 20). Additionally, the preciousness and length of these *pendilia* seemed to represent the emperor’s authority, and the jewels his virtues. Such *pendilia* also seem to appear to be hanging from the diadem of Honorius’ sister Galla Placidia during this period as well (Fig. 21). Thus, it would not appear that the *pendilia* feature of this crown is strictly male or female.

On the other hand, Grierson comments that this pointed crown was typical for empresses. Rousseau leans into this argument by stating that crowns of emperors and

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89 Grierson 1982, 32; Morrisson 1978, 757-9; Rousseau 2004, 6. See Grierson’s “Imperial Crowns” table, vol. III.
91 Grierson 1982, 32.
92 Morrisson 1978, 759.
93 Rousseau 2004, 13. Theodosius I’s diadem was certainly headed in this direction immediately preceding Honorius, although the distinction Rousseau makes as true *pendilia* is unclear.
94 Rousseau 2004, 6. For parallels in the Near East and Central Asia, also see Rousseau.
empresses were often the same, but that the existing differences may be attributed to the perceived personification of Byzantine empresses as cities and values, which may warrant their more elaborate crowns. 96 Certain, as we have already seen, Licinia Eudoxia is portrayed rather early on in an elaborate, radiate crown type. Likewise, my Herman coin specimens demonstrate potential examples of this sort of crown for Sophia (573-578) and Leontia (602-610), prior to Irene (Figs. 1, 2). The culmination of the Byzantine empress’ headpiece is demonstrated in Theodora’s portrait at Ravenna (548), with the rolled and jewelled fabric supporting a similarly jewelled, pinnacled crown with pearl pendilia strands 97 (Fig. 22). As such, Irene’s imperial style may have been modeled on this mosaic portrait, although Byzantine subjects who had not been to Ravenna in Italy may not have understood this reference. In this light, Irene’s crown could be viewed as possibly more feminine than the cross-topped crown of her male counterparts. Due to the fact that empresses had not been represented on coins in recent Byzantine history, we must take caution with this womanly association for Irene’s crown, although it seems plausible.

Attribute of Insignia

Globus Cruciger

Insignia are particularly potent emblems of Byzantine authority. The most ubiquitous of these symbols is the globus cruciger. It derives from the Roman imperial globus, which served to represent the world and to symbolize victory and sovereignty. 98 The Byzantine addition of the cross came to symbolize “the emperor’s authority over the whole world as the

96 2004, 5. Rousseau, however, is more interested in tracing those differences and their influences from other cultures.
98 Grierson 1982, 342.
representative of Jesus."\(^99\) As such, this object signified the physical as well as religious domain of Byzantium. It was not as widely employed on previous Isaurian coinage as it is on the co-regency coinage. Here, we see that in this first issue, both Constantine and Irene are always represented holding the *globus cruciger* in their right hands (Figs 7a, 8a).

**Cruciform Sceptre**

The second key component of the imperial insignia on the co-regency coins is the cruciform sceptre. Like the *globus cruciger*, this object comes from the Roman iconographic corpus. In this case, it derives from the eagle-headed sceptre – *scipio* – component of Roman consular insignia. In its Byzantine context, the *scipio* develops into the cross-topped cruciform sceptre exhibited on these coins.\(^{100}\) Prior to the Isaurian dynasty, the visual employment of the cruciform sceptre was intermittent at best. It does, however, appear among the portraits of Sophia (573-578) and Leontia (602-610) (Figs. 1, 2). It was more formally introduced by Constantine V (741-775), who holds the shaft vertically in the right hand\(^{101}\) (Fig. 23). This detail is curious, since it appears in Irene’s left hand (Figs. 7a, 8a). Granted, Constantine V’s sceptre is a cross potent on steps and was the first instance of its use as a signifier of senior authority, so perhaps the different shape of Irene’s cross-topped sceptre accounts for this shift.\(^{102}\) Nor does Constantine V hold a *globus cruciger*, which may also contribute to the difference. Similarly, the cruciform sceptre clearly has a more distinct visual connotation of Byzantine authority than the *globus cruciger*, in that Irene is the only figure who gets to hold this iconographic piece.

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\(^{100}\) Grierson 1982, 32; Whitting 1973, 298.  
\(^{101}\) Grierson 1973, 138.  
\(^{102}\) The cross potent on steps style will resurface on Irene’s Syracuse solo issues.
Conclusion

During this first period of the co-regency of Constantine VI and Irene, the coins introduce the power dynamics which would play out over the course of their joint rule. These politics have often been explored with problematic arguments, namely assumptions of femininity and agency. I readdress those scholarly assumptions by drawing numismatic precedents to deconstruct Grierson’s associations with the feminine for some of the visual elements on the co-regency coinage. Likewise, I move away from the question of agency in coinage and focus more on the imperial message being set forth by those images produced on coins.

The iconography employed on the co-regency coinage directly reflects imperial perceptions of Irene’s new authority. In the beginning, her physical position does not differ drastically from what we might expect on Isaurian dynastic coinage, but her imperial robes and regalia reintroduce visual attributes that had not appeared with empresses since the Heraclian dynasty in the seventh century. As first Byzantine empress to appear on coins in nearly a century and a half, Irene’s presence is striking, and her public power was secured through the iconography. These components speak far more greatly to the visual strength of her projected authority to the public than to her female status or agency as mother and co-regent to the young emperor Constantine. Thus, it is imperative that we test and reevaluate assumptions of Irene’s image and reign in order to gain new insights on this contested Byzantine empress.
3. Visual authority during Irene’s exile (790 - 792)

Introduction

This second issue of coins, connected with the period of Irene’s exile from 790 to 792, represents the first clear sign of struggle for the throne between Constantine VI and Irene. Although we know about this break in power historically, it must be emphasized that a power shift is clearly illustrated in the iconographic changes which take place on this exile series. It is remarkable that Irene is still represented on the coins, and rather prominently at that. Her absence from the throne is only marked in a few ways, but ways that were easily visible.

Certainly, without knowing about the palace intrigue transpiring in Constantinople, the public would have taken notice of Irene’s now-absent globus cruciger. This political shift would have been even more observable to members of Byzantine society with access to gold solidi, which demonstrate rearranged titular legends. These changes are undeniably deliberate, as coins were the most efficient medium for distributing imperial messages in the ancient world. However, what is surprising is that the coins of this phase of the co-regency do not display nearly as dramatic a rift in imperial power dynamics as the traditional narrative tends to portray. Therefore, Empress Irene, even in her period of exile, remains portrayed with unmistakable power within the co-regency. Her representation on this series of coins defies potential expectations of Byzantine authority in the face of political opposition.

My definition of the exile issue of co-regency coinage corresponds with Grierson’s Class Ib coins. As such, these coins are dated to 790-792 and are much less common than coins of the other issues.

In contrast to the previous subclass, this issue depicts Irene without the globus cruciger and its inscription now begins on the obverse. Grierson asserts

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103 Grierson 1973, 337.
that this shift results in a “properly arranged” inscription, with Emperor Constantine’s name on the obverse.\textsuperscript{104} He declares that Irene was in charge of the co-regency and subsequently gets demoted during her period of exile. However, what becomes clear as the chapter progresses is that Irene’s representation on this set of coins is somewhat reduced, but not as much as one might expect from Grierson’s claims. Overall, her continued numismatic presence --despite political absence-- is more striking than any indication of power loss.

Historical context behind the coins

“In this year the Devil, grudging the emperors’ piety, inspired certain evil men to set the mother against her son and the son against his mother,” Theophanes begins his description of 790 CE. The ancient author goes on to say that Constantine, now at age twenty, “was vigorous and very able and saw that he had no authority whatsoever.”\textsuperscript{105} Clearly, the historical account of what would become the period of Irene’s exile sets a dramatic stage, bringing the battle for co-regent power to the forefront. Grierson takes Theophanes’ account to mean that between December 790 and January 792, Irene was entirely removed from power, whereas other writers propose the end of Irene’s regency and a new reign of Constantine beginning in 790.\textsuperscript{106} Theophanes adds that the empress was held in exile at the secure palace of Eleutherios which she had built.\textsuperscript{107} In this way, the location of Irene’s solitude underscores the fact that she was now a prisoner of an architectural remnant of the authority she once possessed.

Constantine conducted some military campaigns against the Bulgarians and the Arabs; otherwise, we know little about the details regarding Irene’s time in exile. Similarly, we do not know much about the motivation behind Irene’s reinstatement at the beginning of

\textsuperscript{104} Grierson 1973, 338.
\textsuperscript{105} Theophanes AM 6282.
\textsuperscript{106} Grierson 1973, 337.
\textsuperscript{107} Theophanes AM 6283.
792, other than that Irene and “many persons in authority” made requests to Constantine, who at last “pronounced her empress.” This action seems to have been well-received and, at least on the surface, order seems to have been restored. Later that year, Constantine learned of a plot to make former Caesar Nikephoros emperor and on a Saturday in August subsequently blinded Nikephoros and removed the tongues of the other four sons of his grandfather who might have had a claim to the throne. However, Theophanes ominously remarks, “But not for long did God’s judgement leave this unjust deed unavenged: for after a lapse of five years, in the same month and also on a Saturday the same Constantine was blinded by his own mother.”

Attribute of Position

Although the focus of this chapter is on Class Ib coins, position analysis remains consistent across all Class I coins, since the portraiture format remains the same across the two subclasses. However, the consistency in style is key: Irene is very much included among the figures on this second issue of coins (Figs. 9a, 10a). The fact that her portrait is still present on the coins even when the empress is in exile is striking. Even though Irene is represented in the position of ‘junior’ emperor in all Class I coins, her position is not demoted through complete removal from the coins, despite being deposed from the throne. The empress’ perceived authority was clearly such that her position was deemed important enough to maintain and distribute on the exile issue of coinage. Put another way, Constantine retains his position as ‘senior’ emperor in this second issue, but his portrait does not also replace Irene’s despite having the throne to himself at this point in time. He certainly held a great amount of power, but not so exclusively that his portrait demanded the entire obverse. The young emperor may have succeeded in subsuming his father’s position and authority on the

108 Theophanes AM 6284.
109 Theophanes AM 6284.
first issue of co-regency coinage, but even with Irene out of the political picture, Constantine did not successfully supersede the visual authority of his mother on the second issue.

Attribute of Inscriptions

The coin inscriptions display certain continuities and key differences in this second co-regency issue. As with the previous issue, the letter marks on the reverse denoting the denomination and other, largely decorative, information are still comprised of a central ‘M’ and ‘A,’ which are flanked by ‘X’ and ‘N.’ All of these markings remain located below the ground-line that separates them from the Isaurian ancestors portrayed above (Fig. 10b). Furthermore, these markings only occur on the bronze folles, as before. Similarly, the folles of the exile issue follow the pattern of the pre-exile coins, in which they lack descriptive legends.

Where the difference in the Class Ib inscriptions becomes apparent is their shift on the gold solidi. Grierson states that these coins are marked by the beginning of the inscription on the obverse, instead of on the reverse, as before. The inscriptions otherwise remain the same (Figs. 9a-b). A general example includes, according to Grierson, “(Obv.) CONSTANTINOS CA’L’A’ (Rev.) SVN IRINI AVR’ M’ AVTOC” with even more complex variants than the previous issue. (For more specific examples of Class Ib inscriptions, refer to Table 2).

This visual change has been ascribed to reflect the literary accounts dating these particular coins to 790 - 792, as the historical period of Irene’s exile. However, it is worth noting that even if we did not have access to the written sources, the coins very clearly illustrate a noticeable political shift, as indicated by the inscription reversal as well as by

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110 Grierson 1973, 338 footnotes Bellinger’s interpretation, in which the Class Ib coins are dated to 780-790, and that the Class Ia coins are Irene’s brief rebuttal in 790. Grierson, however, rules this interpretation out because it would leave no issued coinage from Dec. 790 to Jan. 792 while Irene was in exile.
111 Grierson 1973, 338.
Irene’s missing globus cruciger, to be discussed later on. Where the shift in political power is not evident by looking at position of the rulers alone, the inscriptions are far more telling. It would appear that, following her exile, Irene’s authority is subverted with the relegation of her name to the reverse depicting past emperors. No longer are her name and titles located on the obverse, in association with the living emperors. Moreover, what cannot be ignored is the fact that Irene’s name is present at all on the coins during her exile. Even when the empress is temporarily removed from power, her imperial authority persists such that her name, titles, and connection to the heir are still included, regardless of the slight demotion to the reverse. Thus, her visual ties to the Byzantine throne remain very much intact during her exile.

Attribute of Dress

Another crucial observation with the exile issue of coins is that all of the imperial dress elements remain the same as they had appeared prior to the empress’ removal from power. This consistency in imperial costume representation is noteworthy. Despite Irene’s deposition, her vested image retains all of its components; neither her loros nor her crown are visually compromised in any way. Conversely, Constantine’s imperial outfit is not altered in order to reflect his newly bestowed sole power, with his mother having been removed from the throne (Figs. 9a, 10a). He remains portrayed in the chlamys, with all of its ceremonial and military connotations that Irene would not have been able to acquire even if she were in power at this stage of the co-regency. This dress persists as the appropriate costume for a senior Augustus, and thus cannot be substantially upgraded to reflect his new status as sole emperor. Additionally, his costume still visually links him to his Isaurian ancestors depicted on the reverse, which, in turn, continues to promote a message of dynastic succession and security. Therefore, the fact that he dons this imperial outfit when
ruling on his own would conceivably solidify his ongoing authority during the period of his mother’s exile.

As for the other, more decorative elements of the co-regent wardrobe, the crowns and facial hair do not change in this second issue. Again, this visual repetition should not be overlooked. Constantine’s crown remains the same as it had throughout the coins from earlier in the co-regency as well as those from his joint rule with his father (Figs. 3a-10a). It is this crown with a central cross that is also worn by his dynastic predecessors, and so the ancestral connection remains strong. Nor does Constantine’s crown display any apparent signifiers of his power gain. As he was already represented wearing the traditional Byzantine crown for the era, such a visual upgrade may not have been possible anyhow. However, it is worth mentioning that, like his chlamys, Constantine’s crown bears no visual indication of his new authority during his mother’s exile. On the other hand, Irene, who is remarkably present on these coins, continues to be portrayed in her embellished four-pinnacle crown (Figs. 9a, 10a). Although the empress has lost substantial power in this period, that detail is not readily apparent to coin users by looking at the imperial headpieces.

Likewise, a beardless Constantine remains evident on the exile coins (Figs. 9a, 10a). In the earlier portion of the co-regency, the numismatic emphasis on Constantine’s youth seems logical. However, by the time the emperor deposed his mother in 790, he was nineteen years old and certainly would have been eligible to rule in his own right. Although the coins issued from 790 to 792 still contain Irene’s portrait, one might expect that in this second issue, Constantine ought to be represented with a beard, like his predecessors. However, the emperor – now senior both in numismatic position and in succession – continues to be portrayed beardless, even with his mother out of the political picture. This observation is intriguing because even during his mother’s period of exile, Constantine lacks this Byzantine symbol of masculinity and power. This design choice may, in fact, be linked to Irene’s enduring presence on the coinage, as particular views regarding Constantine and
Irene’s authority may have persisted during the empress’ exile. Moreover, the visual consistency in all forms of dress for both Constantine VI and Irene that extends from the previous issue to that of the exile indicates that denotation of power throughout the chronology of the co-regency thus far is not reflected through the imperial garments specifically. Rather, this continuity suggests that the authority commanded by each co-regent’s costume does not conflict the way other numismatic features do.

Attribute of Insignia

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the *globus cruciger* is one of the most recognizable symbols of Byzantine authority. As such, its absence on the exile issue is extraordinarily significant. This shift is even more apparent when observing its reappearance on Class II coins issued upon Irene’s return to the throne, as will be discussed further in the following chapter. Thus, the only time Irene does not hold this sacred object is during her exile from 790 to 792 (Figs. 9a, 10a). Therefore, the subtraction of this insignia on the coins is a physical reflection of that brief power-loss. In this regard, what is happening in the historical narrative is overtly told on the officially-issued coins from this period as well. Therefore, even those who were far and away from the literature and the imperial court would have come into contact with this information via handling the coins. Furthermore, the removal of the *globus cruciger* from Irene’s right hand would have been a clear sign to Byzantine coin users, regardless of denomination or literacy, unlike the inscription shift on the *solidi*.

To the currency-using public, the deletion of this object must have been the easiest way to visually strip Irene of power. At the same time, Constantine retains this vital signifier of Byzantine power in this issue as in the others of the co-regency. However, I reiterate the puzzling fact that even in exile, Irene is still portrayed on the coins. She may have lost her seat on the throne, but the damage to her reputation caused by this action was clearly not
so definitive that her portrait was removed from the coins entirely. It could be the case that Irene offered a degree of legitimacy to Constantine’s own position in such a way that he could not afford for her effigy to be excluded completely. Where it is absent, the *globus cruciger* reveals a degree of awareness surrounding imperial Byzantium’s projected image to the world.

The cruciform sceptre, as I have already discussed, elicits Roman notions of consular power. As is the case with the Class Ia coins, this Class Ib issue demonstrates the same phenomenon that only Irene holds this piece of insignia (Figs. 9a, 10a). Thus, regardless of Irene’s absence, the empress continues to be represented holding this Byzantine power symbol. This observation stands in stark contrast to Constantine, who now as sole ruler, does not appear to take on this signifier of authority throughout this issue. As will become apparent in the subsequent chapter, Irene is represented with the sceptre in hand at all times. Therefore, the fact that this insignia remains intact during her period of exile is remarkable. This point diverges considerably from her representation with the *globus cruciger* at this time. Certainly, the cruciform sceptre seems to have signified a distinctive kind of power that was not inherently connected to that of the *globus cruciger*. If, as Grierson says, the cruciform scepter is “favored for empresses and junior colleagues” and is usually worn by rulers wearing the *loros*,\(^{112}\) then we might understand its persistence in Irene’s portrait. Seeing as the first appearance of this insignia in the eighth century is with Irene,\(^ {113}\) its presence ought to be significant and not an iconographic removal to be taken lightly, even if to reflect the empress’ power loss. As a result of this separation, Irene was able to maintain possession of this specific imperial component, regardless of her perceived authority over the whole world.

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113 Grierson 1973, 139. If the cruciform sceptre, is, in fact, linked more so to emperors and junior colleagues, then its first occurrence of the century being with Irene is unsurprising, since empresses have not been represented on coins in the last century and a half.
Conclusion

This next phase of co-regency coinage demonstrates a clear iconographic shift. Although others and I have attributed this issue to the historicity of Irene’s recorded period of exile from 790 to 792, what ought to be apparent are the visual changes that occur between this issue and the previous. The rearrangement of inscriptions on the *solidi* and the removal of Irene’s *globus cruciger* on both denominations exhibit definitive changes in the imperial message being distributed, with a detectable slant toward a higher-status, literate gold-using audience. For the wider public, the absence of the *globus* could be quite noticeable, and as the most easily recognizable symbol of Byzantine authority, users could reasonably interpret a change in power without ever hearing about the events at Constantinople. Similarly, gold users could have made those same interpretations, with the added benefit of writing. Even if illiterate, these people could certainly have noticed the reversal of the inscriptions and may have made their own interpretations accordingly.

On the other hand, it is critical to note that this exile event is hardly emphasized in the historical accounts. Theophanes merely tells us that the empress was sent to her palace at Eleutherios and does not dwell on the events that followed. The author simply states in the following sections that Constantine reinstated his mother, and their joint rule was subsequently declared and accepted. One might suspect that, given Theophanes’ iconophile bias, the author might detail the empress’ exile for the purposes of portraying her as a victim of the iconoclasts, but he does not. Likewise, this seemingly crucial period in the history has not been especially stressed by scholars, either. Such little emphasis on Irene’s exile in literature suggests that perhaps the empress’ power loss was not so severe as Grierson implies. Nevertheless, Irene’s substantial presence on the coins during her supposed exile is extraordinary.
4. Visual authority after Irene’s exile (792 - 797)

Introduction

This chapter situates Empress Irene within the last numismatic phase of the co-regency, leading up to the fateful blinding of her son and fellow co-regent, Constantine VI. These coins would have been minted in the latter portion of their reign, between 792 and 797, following Irene’s reinstatement to power after her brief period of exile from 790 to 792. Here, we see the return of certain visual elements, the alteration of some, and the addition of another. It is in this final co-regency chapter where I am able to stitch together the combined implications of these repeated or absent visual motifs. Moreover, it is in this later phase of the co-regency that the struggle for power between the two co-rulers becomes even more pronounced on the coins.

The second class of coins issued during the co-regency breaks with earlier Isaurian numismatic precedents by removing the previous emperors from the reverse and instead placing one living ruler per side (Figs. 7b-10b, 24a-b, 25a-b). Grierson’s Class II consists of Irene on the obverse and Constantine on the reverse, replacing the ancestors. However, this definition feels, on the one hand, rather dismissive of Constantine’s authority following his mother’s reinstatement, yet on the other hand, rather presumptive of Irene’s supremacy. Although Grierson cites that Constantine’s name is followed by a control mark, this feature is not necessarily uniform across all types and so his position may not have been unanimously understood. In addition, following her restoration to power, Irene regains her globus cruciger, which is another numismatic change that would have been noticeable to the public regardless of political knowledge. Ultimately, I reach the same conclusion as Grierson

\[114\] Grierson 1973, 337.
\[115\] 1973, 339.
that Irene is represented on the obverse and Constantine on the reverse, although I place more emphasis on the importance of the bronze coins in this interpretation than Grierson does.

Historical context behind the coins

The final years of the co-regency were characterized by ongoing foreign conflicts. Family conflicts also continued to escalate. In 795, Constantine had become unsatisfied in his marriage to Maria, so her divorced her and sent her to a convent.\(^{116}\) That same year, the emperor married Theodote, his mother’s maid.\(^{117}\) The Church disapproved of this second marriage, causing Constantine to fall out of favor with the Church.\(^{118}\) Constantine’s marriages suggest that the emperor was not just battling for authority with his mother and the state, but also with the favor of the Church. Regardless, this new marriage produced a new heir, called Leo, in 796. While Constantine attended to those family matters, Theophanes tells us that Irene used that opportunity to plot the deposition of her son for good. Upon traveling, Constantine was unknowingly escorted by his mother’s supporters, who then seized him and brought him to the palace, where Irene was waiting with her loyal officers. Then, on Saturday, August 15th, Constantine was blinded “at the behest of his mother and her advisors,” and so Irene ascended to the throne.\(^{119}\)

Attribute of Position

This third and final issue of Constantine VI and Irene does not employ the same pattern of positioning as we have observed throughout the previous issues of the co-regency. Rather

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\(^{116}\) Theophanes AM 6287. This divorce was not formally legal, since no adultery or conspiracy to murder was proven; marriage in Byzantium was considered for life: see Herrin 2001, 96.

\(^{117}\) Theophanes AM 6287; Garland 1999, 84-5; Goodacre 1957, 151.

\(^{118}\) Known as the Moechian Controversy (from the Greek *moichos* - adulterer): see Garland 1999, 84.

\(^{119}\) Theophanes AM 6289.
than the familiar composition of the two co-regents on the obverse with the Isaurian ancestors on the reverse, Class II coins forgo the familial portraits in exchange for larger portraits of one living emperor per side (Figs. 24a-b, 25a-b). This visual shift in position on the coins reflects what is known from the historical record, in which Irene returns from exile to Constantinople in 792. Although some populations may not have fully comprehended the political events that stimulated this transformation on the coins, the difference in portraits and positions would have indicated at least some recognizable change.

The implications of this shift in power dynamics as illustrated on the coins are compelling. Following Irene’s reinstatement to the throne, a great debate regarding which side portrays which ruler on the *solidi* emerges.\(^{120}\) Was Emperor Constantine VI on the more prominent obverse side, as rightful heir to the throne? Or was Empress Irene placed in the forefront, as the newly-reinstated co-regent on behalf of her son? The simple fact that these coins are issued during the reign of Emperor Constantine VI – with Empress Irene as co-regent – and that Constantine, as senior emperor, may have been favored for numismatic authority.\(^{121}\) Whiting identifies Constantine as on the *solidi* obverse and Irene on the reverse with matching *folles*.\(^{122}\) I demonstrate through the *folles* later on why this interpretation cannot not hold true.

On the other hand, Irene – with her greater age over Constantine and her twenty-plus years of experience as empress alongside not one, but two, emperors – may have been preferred for the obverse.\(^{123}\) The fact that the empress was able to recover power after

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120 As the obverse is often perceived to be the more important side due to die engraving and striking techniques, it is the side most commonly associated with the main ruling authority.

121 Frequently the co-regency coins are referred to as ‘*solidus* of Constantine VI’ in catalogues (e.g., American Numismatic Society MANTIS database, Dumbarton Oaks online catalogue and publications). Certainly, at twenty-one, Constantine was past majority age and no longer needed his mother’s regency.

122 1973, 167. This argument is weakened by the fact that the emperor’s image did not capitalize on this seniority even on the exile coinage, making the argument for Constantine on the obverse weak.

123 Grierson is one of the most notable proponents.
being exiled is quite revealing: it was an imperially-sanctioned move.\textsuperscript{124} We cannot know Constantine’s personal motives for allowing his mother’s return, but he and the imperial court granted it nonetheless. Additionally, this new design distances the co-regency from the iconoclast dynasts, and it may have even been an external condition for Irene’s return. Conversely, the ancestral portrait removal may have also been a side effect of Irene’s own process of authority re-establishment. As a result of all these changes, the new portrait format of the Class II coins may ultimately be a concession to Irene’s renewed authority.

This debate over sides and portraits disappears when comparing the \textit{solidi} with the corresponding issue of \textit{folles}, as we shall see in the following section. Instead of ambiguous placements as on the \textit{solidi}, on the \textit{folles} Constantine is very clearly located above a ground-line and denominational marks, which are typical signifiers of the reverse (Fig. 25b).\textsuperscript{125} Therefore, these \textit{folles} may serve as evidence for the argument that Irene also takes the obverse of the \textit{solidi}, if we speculate that consistency in the imperial authority being conveyed matters. Certainly, throughout this thesis, the theme of change and continuity surfaces often. Representations of the rulers on the coins have remained consistent except for a few pivotal differences. Although as we have seen certain divergences between the \textit{solidi} and the \textit{folles}, the iconographic patterns remain generally similar. Therefore, on the whole, I would argue in favor of Irene’s portrait on the obverse of both the \textit{solidi} and \textit{folles} on the basis that the shift in position on the coins is drastic enough for viewers without also switching sides across denominations.\textsuperscript{126} If we can agree that Irene is represented on the obverse of Class II \textit{solidi} and \textit{folles}, this numismatic shift would

\textsuperscript{124} It is possible that the imperial court, the general public, or other audiences urged for her return – whether as a dislike for Constantine as sole ruler or as a preference for Irene generally, it is difficult to say. See Theophanes AM 6284.

\textsuperscript{125} Grierson 1973, 339.

\textsuperscript{126} If the case turns out to be that Constantine VI does, in fact, take the obverse of Class II \textit{solidi}, then this observation would require a new understanding of audiences to whom these denominations were being targeted.
indicate a substantial augmentation of Irene’s authority at this time. Not only did Irene make a powerful comeback from exile, but the empress exceeded her prior position within the co-regency.

Attribute of Inscriptions

The inscriptions on the Class II coins become especially intriguing in light of Irene’s recent reinstatement, particularly given the role they play in shaping the position debate as well as for their new standardization. In addition, it is worth reiterating that the denomination marks do not occur on *solidi*, thus making them a crucial distinction when comparing the two denominations. Until this point, I have merely referenced these reverse marks on the Class I *folles*, but now I will highlight their greater impact on authority as represented on Class II coins. The presence of the marks on this issue, albeit unchanged from the previous issues, offers a potential solution to the position debate over the corresponding *solidi*, as we have just seen. Likewise, Constantine’s presence above the letter marks on the reverse force his portrait to appear smaller than that of Irene (Figs. 25a-b). Although the portraits on bronze reverses throughout the Isaurian dynasty are inevitably confined for the same spatial reason, Constantine’s location would appear to be a subversion of his previously-established senior authority, perhaps as a result of Irene’s renewed authority following her return to the throne.

The legend inscriptions transform yet again on this new issue of coinage. Here, too, we see an apparent shift that marks a break in the numismatic record, which happens to coincide with the historical period following Irene’s exile and reinstatement to power. Grierson also notes the quality and execution of the relief on the Class II issue.\(^\text{127}\)

Regardless, the side on which the inscription begins is rather challenging to determine

\(^{127}\) Grierson 1973, 339.
these coins, due to the continuing debate regarding the *solidi* portraiture. Although I have made my case for the location of Constantine on the reverse, the debate cannot be resolved on the basis of *solidi* legends alone. Grierson does, however, add that the control letter which tends to follow Constantine’s name is indicative of his reverse position.\(^{128}\) (For specific examples, see Table 3). This feature is not entirely ubiquitous on these coins, so it must not be considered a guaranteed marker of Constantine’s location, but it is, at the very least, a strongly suggestive one.

What these *solidi* tell us for certain is that the inscriptions are much more standardized in this period. The legends appear almost exclusively as ἸΡΙΝΗ ᾿ΑΡΩΣΤΙ and *constant* ῾ΙΡΙΝΗ ᾿ΑΡΩΣΤΙ with their corresponding portraits (Figs. 24a-b).\(^{129}\) The names of the co-regents are no longer connected by some form of καὶ, as they had been on Class I coins. Not only does that detail create difficulty in discerning where the inscription begins, but it would also seem to indicate that perhaps the balance of power within the co-regency shifts such that a conjunction was no longer essential. The ambiguity of this omission may have consequently enabled the public to make individual interpretations in this regard. This standardization also is telling because Constantine’s name appears in the nominative case, while Irene’s appears in the dative. Grierson suggests that this format makes Irene “the object of some acclamation (e.g., “To the Empress Irene, many years”) whose precise terms are left to be understood.”\(^{130}\) This interpretation is compelling because the names of Byzantine emperors most often appeared in the nominative,\(^{131}\) so this difference in case would appear to be deliberate, even if that purpose is not fully clear. These contrasting case usages may, in fact, be targeted at a literate audience who could have interpreted the subtleties that no longer survive among modern-day audiences.

\(^{128}\) Grierson 1973, 339.
\(^{130}\) Grierson 1973, 339.
\(^{131}\) Grierson 1973, 180.
On this set of coins, Irene’s primary title becomes *Augusta*. Here, the empress is distanced from her maternal title μητρὶ and instead represented with the title which endows her with greater political authority, ἀρωστὶ.132 On the other hand, Constantine’s title of *basileus* is more explicitly spelled out than it was previously. It becomes ᾳς’, with the suspension stroke of contraction.133 This expansion may imply an effort on the emperor’s part to assert his authority in the face of his mother’s return. Irene is not yet represented here with the feminized title *basilissa*, as she would be on the coins of her sole reign. This standardization of titulature suggests that the gold-using public was witnessing greater care in the quality, spelling, and organization of the coins being circulated throughout the Empire. Furthermore, these people may have even understood the subtle messages of authority implied by the case usage.

Attribute of Dress

On this final issue of co-regency coinage, the imperial costumes and personal adornments worn by Constantine VI and Irene remain the same as on previous issues. He is still represented in the *chlamys*, and Irene in the *loros*. Their crowns appear the same. Constantine continues to be portrayed beardless. The only difference is that there are no longer bearded, *chlamys*-clad Isaurian emperors on the reverse (Figs. 24b, 25b). As I noted in the previous chapter, Constantine’s dress is not visibly enhanced in order to reflect his new sole status, nor is Irene’s garment dressed down to illustrate her deposition from power. Since neither of the co-regents’ outfits were altered during the exile issue, it should not come as a surprise that they remain unchanged on Class II coins.

With this continuity having been established throughout all three co-regency series, a discussion of the implications is required. One of the first connections that emerged with

\[132\] Which, as noted above, is the genitive form.

\[133\] Grierson 1973, 189.
respect to dress was the shift from *loros* to *chlamys* as the costume of the deceased Isaurian emperors. The former style was employed on the coinage of Leo IV and Constantine VI, but by the co-regency coinage, the ancestral costume becomes the *chlamys*. In making this change, Constantine’s costume remains the same as it had on the coinage with his father but is now also the same as all of his predecessors. On the other hand, this alteration distances Irene from the garment that would have more overtly linked her to the Isaurians or to her son. However, coin users possibly would have been able to make the connection between the empress and the dynastic predecessors, as those coins could very well have still been in circulation. Thus, both of the wardrobe choices employed for the respective co-regents suited each ruler so effectively that they required no changes as the co-regency issues progressed.

Further still, this shift in dress could be attributed to symbolic meanings as well. In my view, Irene commandeers not just a consular costume, but a costume with far greater religious significance than the *chlamys*. Conversely, the military implications of the *chlamys* render Irene unable to wear it, as an empress lacked the authority to lead the Byzantine army. In this regard, it would seem that Constantine and Irene’s spheres of power have their limits. Perhaps the costume change on the reverse from *loros* to *chlamys* was, on the one hand, a concession of religious authority to Irene. On the other hand, it indicates that Irene was not granted unlimited power, not even after her reinstatement to the throne. In this sense, Irene’s transition to sole rulership had clearly been advancing throughout the co-regency, and – although not a complete take-over at this time – suggests that Irene’s seizure of power in 797 was not as isolated an incident as the literature often portrays. Certainly, these elements of dress suited Irene’s imperial message well enough that she

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continues to wear them – albeit with slight modifications – in the coinage of her sole reign as well, as will be explored in the next chapter.

In addition, emperor Constantine remains beardless still throughout the final issue of co-regency coinage, even though he would have been in his mid-20s (Figs. 24b, 25b). Some might speculate whether Constantine’s beardless portrayal was, in fact, a positively conscious choice. It may be possible that Constantine VI was actively hearkening back to Constantine the Great, who was also represented beardless (Fig. 18). Magdalino has edited a thorough volume which explores Constantine the Great as a model for imperial claims to and assertions of rule. The desire to make these connections to Constantine the Great is valid, given his role as first Christian emperor, founder of Constantinople, chair of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea, etc. However, it is unclear how frequently the Byzantines would have referenced him, other than the imperial use of his title in the seventh to tenth centuries. In this light, whether Constantine VI’s name was primarily intended to refer all the way back to Constantine the Great, or more recently to his grandfather and prime iconoclast, Constantine V, remains perplexing.

Although Irene would not have had the option to take on this symbol of power and authority, the choice to portray Constantine without the beard appears deliberate. Constantine the Great was represented beardless, and this connection may have been made when Constantine VI and Irene were hailed as New Constantine and New Helena. This pairing was not unique: empress Pulcheria and her husband Marcian were hailed as such in 451; likewise, Justin II and his wife Sophia in the late sixth century. Therefore, it is unreasonable to assume that this declaration, which occurred in 787, influenced numismatic

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135 Magdalino 1994, 3.
136 Magdalino 1994, 3. It began with Tiberius II in the late 6th century, but common within the Heraclian, Isaurian, and initially the Macedonian dynasties.
137 Kotsis 2012, 201; Noble 2009, 150.
138 Whitby 1994, 89.
design preferences beginning in 780. Furthermore, these titles of New Constantine and New Helena were typically bestowed on emperors by others, rather than declared directly by the emperors themselves. Consequently, it would be uncustomary for emperors to adopt that identification in media. Since neither these titles nor any other indicators of the iconophile victory are reflected on the coins themselves, it would be unusual for Constantine’s missing beard to be the only visual signifier, especially given that he was not depicted with one in the first place. Rather than allying the emperor with the ancient, immensely religious authority of Constantine the Great, this beardless representation would consequently seem to level the playing field for co-regent dominance by showing Constantine with youthful authority.

In fact, Constantine’s beardless portrayal may go so far as to be a negative attempt at stifling his imperial authority and reception. At this point, one might anticipate that, following his period of sole reign, Constantine might exhibit an enhanced representation in an effort to maintain his authority in the face of his mother’s return, as we see with the akakia later on. Instead, his perpetual beardlessness may be interpreted as a subversion of the emperor’s power, in which he lacks a crucial marker of Byzantine imperial authority. Grierson is adamant about this point, that Constantine’s beardless face is clearly meant as subordination, indicating that the emperor had not achieved manhood. If this reading is correct, then it would also indicate a larger message about his imperial power being perpetuated -- one in which Constantine VI was never a complete senior emperor like his father or ancestors. As such, his perceived authority cannot eclipse Irene’s as significantly as a bearded emperor’s might.

139 Whitby 1994, 89-90.  
140 Grierson 1973, 337.
Attribute of Insignia

*Globus Cruciger* & Cruciform Sceptre

The insignia on the final issue of co-regency coins provides the most compelling case for chronological and denominational differences. The same pattern in which Constantine is always represented holding the *globus cruciger* and never the cruciform sceptre holds true for all Class II coins, as before. Where Irene lacked the *globus cruciger* in the exile issue of coins, she is portrayed holding it once again, upon her reinstatement (Figs. 9a-10a, 24a-25a). This numismatic gesture symbolizes Irene’s return to, and now retention of, power from 792 onward. Certainly, the *globus cruciger* acts as a vital – and apparently, controversial – iconographic signifier of Byzantine authority on coins. This pattern regarding the *globus cruciger* occurs on both *solidi* and *folles*, which demonstrates a continuity in the imperial message announcing Irene’s reinstated position. Where the *globus cruciger* appears, it emphasizes the strength and authority of the Byzantine Empire as a whole. In conjunction with the standardization of inscriptions, the renewed presence of the *globus cruciger* with Irene suggests a restoration of, and possibly even greater stability of, order within the co-regency.

Meanwhile, we see Irene continuing to hold the cruciform sceptre on both denominations, as she has held in her left hand across all classes and denominations. This observation stands in blatant contrast to Constantine, who is never represented holding the cruciform sceptre, not even during his mother’s period of exile (Figs. 7a-10a, 24b-25b). Furthermore, this consistent dissimilarity between the two rulers’ insignia would have been apparent to users of both denominations. These remarks beg the question: how is the cruciform sceptre functioning? There may, in fact, be a feminine association. Grierson tells us that Irene is the first to hold it in the eighth century, and we continue to see this pattern
until Eudocia on the coins of Basil I (866-882) (Fig. 26).\textsuperscript{141} The cruciform sceptre appears in the hands of a woman earlier on the coins of Justin II and Sophia and Phocas and Leontia in the late-sixth and early-seventh centuries, respectively (Figs. 1, 2). Its specific meaning in these contexts remains unclear.

On the other hand, the cruciform sceptre may indicate a senior emperor in the early-ninth century with Nicephorus I, Michael I, Leo V, and Michael II.\textsuperscript{142} Therefore, this disparity between Constantine and Irene’s sceptre possession may then be the result of an early association with either an empress or a junior colleague, rather than with a senior emperor. It may be the case here as well, as with the loros, where Irene may have assisted in this status transition. Consequently, there may be a connection to Irene’s imperial representation as a whole: she wears the Roman consular robe, so the Roman consular scipio may serve to complete her performative costume as sovereign. This connection is supported by fourth- and fifth-century depictions, in which the consular costume is comprised of “the eagle topped sceptre; the globe, plain, or surmounted by a victory; the laurel wreath; the mappa; or the money bag”\textsuperscript{143} (Figs. 27, 28). We see these links even down to Tiberius II in the late-sixth century (Fig. 29). Moreover, hearkening back to these Roman symbols of power may have served to bolster Irene’s tenuous position.

\textit{Akakia}

The last of the insignia presents one of the more intriguing iconographic assertions of Constantine’s authority within the co-regency. Although the emperor never got to hold the cruciform sceptre in portraits, Constantine’s physical insignia did, at last, get an upgrade. Here, on Class II coins, for the first time within the co-regency, we see Constantine hold a

\textsuperscript{141} Grierson 1973, 139.
\textsuperscript{142} Grierson 1973, 113.
\textsuperscript{143} Galavaris 2012a, 374.
new object, the *akakia*. It is a cylindrical purple silk roll containing dust, which would have been held by Byzantine emperors during ceremonies. It also symbolized the mortal nature of man. Like the other insignia, the *akakia* is derived from Roman precedents. More specifically, it developed from the *mappa*, or the cloth used by the Roman consuls to commence races at the hippodrome (Fig. 28). The *akakia* would be held separately from other insignia from the fifth century onward.\textsuperscript{144} Constantine is now represented holding this object in his left hand in addition to the *globus cruciger*, which he continues to hold in his right (Fig. 24b). Drawing on this established power signifier, Constantine’s authority on coins appears to rival Irene’s. The *akakia* appears exclusively on the Class II *solidi*, after Irene’s restoration to power. Put another way, Constantine is not portrayed holding the *akakia* in the issues prior, and never on the *folles* (Figs. 7a-10a, 25b). Therefore, this numismatic change, albeit substantial, would have primarily reached the audience of gold users. As far exclusively bronze-using populations were concerned, Constantine held the same amount of iconographic authority in the post-exile issue as he had in all other co-regency coinage.

Although Irene is never depicted with the *akakia* on the co-regency coinage, this visual absence would not appear to carry the same significance as the absence of the cruciform sceptre in Constantine’s portraits. Instead, the more notable side to that point is the fact that Constantine is only represented with the *akakia* following the empress’ reinstatement. The presence of this new object in Constantine’s iconographic repertoire may indeed reflect a desire to exhibit a greater display of power in light of his mother’s return. Certainly, Irene’s ability to reclaim her portion of the imperial throne suggests that Constantine did not succeed in permanently deposing her, nor was he able to rule on his own in perpetuity. Perhaps the imperial court, the Church, the military, and/or the public may

\textsuperscript{144} Grierson 1973, 133-42.
have held her authority in such esteem that they did not fully embrace Constantine as sole emperor.

Furthermore, it appears significant that the *akakia* emerges only on the *solidi*. This detail indicates that Constantine may have been more concerned with perception of his persona by those of higher social and political rank than by those of the common people. Additionally, Grierson notes that the *mappa*/*akakia* is no longer associated specifically with the *loros* in the eighth century.\(^{145}\) This point reveals that, prior to the eighth century, a *chlamys*-clad Constantine would not necessarily be represented holding the *akakia*. Conversely, the *loros*-donning Irene need not specifically hold the *akakia* by this stage in Byzantine history. However, it is compelling that Constantine’s new insignia is formerly connected with the costume worn by his mother, rather than his own. Discussion of the *akakia* has not been given proper attention in Isaurian scholarship, but I have demonstrated that the addition of this iconographic element later in the co-regency complicates the narrative of Irene’s ascent to power by highlighting certain, frequently overlooked, resistance on Constantine’s behalf.

**Conclusion**

All of these forces may have influenced reception of this third and final issue of coinage. As such, these numismatic choices reflect the visual interplay characterized by the turbulent power dynamics of the co-regency. Although most of these numismatic features have remained consistent throughout all of the issues, the differences that do take shape are quite significant. Each of these visual elements construct Irene’s role for Byzantine subjects to see on these circulating coins. She was barred from particular numismatic aspects of Byzantine authority, such as a beard or *chlamys*. However, regardless of the

\(^{145}\) 1973, 133.
addition of the *akakia* on *solidi*, Constantine’s authority fails to eclipse entirely that of his mother. If anything, the disappearance of the ‘S’ joining the rulers’ titular inscriptions on *solidi* highlights the ambiguity of the unprecedented circumstances. Lastly, Constantine’s position below the denomination marks and beardless face into this final series suggest that his authority was, in fact, undermined by Irene’s.

 Furthermore, Irene’s careful combination of Byzantine and Roman titles, dress, and regalia construct her deliberate persona as an actively engaged, authoritative co-regent. The empress’ tenuous position as co-regent required visual negotiation and reiteration before she could even consider ruling on her own. Her authority would return full force for the remaining five years of the co-regency and ultimately subsume that of Constantine, rendering her the first sole female emperor of Byzantium. All of these visual statements on imperial authority were projected and distributed to the public, via the coins. By the end of the co-regency, it is all but spelled out that Irene’s power rested not in her womanhood or not even necessarily in her political influence as *Augusta*, but in the public eye at all levels of Byzantine society.
5. Visual authority during Irene’s sole reign (797 - 802)

Introduction

This chapter delves into the iconographic shifts which appear in Irene’s coinage as sole ruler from 797 to 802 CE. Her authority on coins had increased substantially throughout the final years of the co-regency, and these new issues of coinage mark the completion of her power transition. Constantine’s removal from the throne in 797 left a void in the numismatic portraiture, which Irene’s solo issues filled in compelling ways. Although many of the iconographic attributes remain similar to those of the co-regency, the differences are pivotal: the reverses of the *solidi* break with recent patterns, and those of the *folles* return to old traditions. The reintroduction of the denominational reverse type on the bronze and the appearance of Irene’s portrait on both sides of the gold construct Irene’s authority on her solo coins in general accordance with earlier Byzantine customs, albeit with some innovations. Curiously, these coins as primary evidence exhibit visual indications of her new role, but do not necessarily proclaim her sole power. It is also significant that the iconographic elements of Irene’s solo coinage appear to speak even more pointedly to the respective denominational audiences than the co-regency coinage did. Moreover, now that Irene’s power had been consolidated, the iconography on her coinage no longer conveys messages of competition, but of power assertion through continuity and tradition.

Where Kotsis focuses on the coinage of Irene’s sole reign in order to show how Irene used this iconography to define her authority as a woman, I seek to expand the discussion beyond female characteristics. As I have already demonstrated throughout this thesis, some of these elements of Irene’s coins do not fully elucidate the nuances of her representation. Instead, the evidence seems to support greater connections with traditional

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146 2012.
numismatic patterns which do not rely on gender as explanation. In fact, the evolution of attributes visible on Irene’s solo coins suggest that the empress’ image appropriated some of Constantine’s formerly ‘masculine’ qualities to convey her new authority as sole ruler. In this regard, Irene’s portrait depicts her as even more in line with Byzantine imperial representations on her solo coins as Basilissa than she was as Augusta on those of the co-regency.

Grierson’s description of Irene’s solo issues begins problematically when he states, “The accession of Irene, both as a woman and as sole ruler, created several problems for those in charge of the mint.”147 However, he does not tease out these concerns, but rather proceeds to describe the coins in a comparatively objective manner. He divides the coins into four types: a Constantinople solidus, a Constantinople follis, and two solidus types from Syracuse. No silver issues are known from Irene’s sole reign, and no folles from Syracuse.148 The solidi of both mints are known for their dual-sided portraits of Irene, although as we shall see, the Sicilian representations play around with the iconography which has otherwise remained relatively consistent on Constantinopolitan gold and bronze issues. Moreover, Irene’s coin production as Augusta and co-regent was a relatively uncommon practice in Byzantine history, but she was absolutely unprecedented in minting coins as sole female sovereign of the Byzantine Empire.149 In this light, the iconographic choices displayed on the coins ought to work strategically with Irene’s unparalleled position and with the messages they convey about her new authority.

147 1973, 347.
149 Grierson 1982, 152.
Historical context behind the coins

The previous chapters have been building up the political turmoil which characterized Constantine VI and Irene’s co-regency. We last saw Constantine seized and blinded by Irene’s supporters in August of 797.^{150} Herrin notes that in Byzantium and the West, intentional blinding was a popular tool for eliminating political threats.^{151} Thus, Constantine was rendered ineligible to rule, according to Byzantine standards.^{152} In fact, Constantine and Irene had some of the brothers of Leo IV blinded and tongues cut off, in order to mitigate claims to the throne after Leo’s death.^{153} The prior employment of this method for securing power during the co-regency is often downplayed – if mentioned at all – in the narratives told, presumably in order to dramatize Irene’s own ascent to power. Theophanes casts Constantine, the last descendant of the Isaurian lineage, as having alienated the Church and the public with his divorce, failed military efforts, and questionably legitimate heir.^{154} However, it is worth emphasizing that Theophanes writes as an iconophile, critical of the iconoclast Isaurians, and that none of these events connected with Constantine’s later life factor visibly into the issued coinage. Therefore, regardless of Irene’s agency in the blinding event, both history and the coins acknowledge her formal succession of the throne.

Irene found herself in a unique position as sole ruler. In the year 797, she would have been over forty years old and well past childbearing age; she could remarry, but a new

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^{150} Theophanes AM 6289. Mango’s translation notes the uncertainty regarding Constantine VI’s fate, whether he died soon after the blinding incident or whether he lived out his years quietly.
^{151} 99.
^{152} Garland and Herrin tell this story quite dramatically, with Garland placing deliberate intent on Irene’s part. Furthermore, Theophanes the Confessor (see Garland 1999, 87 and Herrin 2001, 99) records that the sun went away for seventeen days, as an auspicious reflection of Constantine’s blinding. Whether or not this blinding event was officially sanctioned by Irene remains difficult to prove, but he continued to live on as a blind monk and attended by Theodote: Herrin 2001, 99; Goodacre 1957, 152.
^{153} Theophanes AM 6274 places this action after Irene’s reinstatement that year in 792, with the implication that Constantine VI did not conduct this order during his period as sole emperor.
^{154} Theophanes AM 6282 - 6287.
husband could very well outlive her and thus inherit the whole Byzantine Empire.\textsuperscript{155}

Theophanes records that in March of 801, “the pious Irene remitted the civic taxes for the inhabitants of Byzantium and cancelled the so-called komerkia of Abydos and Hieron.”\textsuperscript{156} He adds that Nikephoros I would restore these tariffs on maritime traffic reaching Constantinople just a few years later.\textsuperscript{157} The tax question will be revisited later on, but it is worth emphasizing here that scholars have accused Irene of trying to bribe the public through this tax relief and other charitable gifts.\textsuperscript{158} Additionally, Irene was betrothed to Western Emperor Charlemagne, but in 802, her finance minister Nikephoros staged a “bloodless” coup d’etat and declared himself emperor before she had the chance to remarry.\textsuperscript{159} Finally, Nikephoros exiled Irene first to the island of Prinkipo and later to Lesbos, where she died only a few months later in 803.\textsuperscript{160}

Continuity at Constantinople: \textit{Solidi}

Position and Inscription

The positioning of the imperial portrait on Irene’s solo coinage commands attention. The changes in position we have seen throughout the co-regency have progressed from senior and junior colleagues on the obverse and former emperors on the reverse, to Irene and Constantine on opposing sides, with the ancestors no longer present. Now, we see Irene’s portrait subsume both sides of the \textit{solidus} (Figs. 30a-b). Her location recalls that of the co-regency Class II \textit{solidi} and \textit{folles} obverses (see Figs. 24a, 25a). Her front-facing bust still

\textsuperscript{155} Herrin 2001, 116.
\textsuperscript{156} AM 6293. Mango notes his choice to translate \textit{ἐκούφισεν} as ‘cancelled’ instead of ‘reduced’ based on prior ambiguity in AM 6287.
\textsuperscript{157} AM 6302.
\textsuperscript{158} E.g., Goodacre 1957, 154 and Sear 1974, 262.
\textsuperscript{159} This marriage would have united the two halves of the former Roman Empire and perhaps even eased tensions between the Churches over iconoclasm: Herrin 2001, 125-6; Goodacre 1957, 154; Neil 2013, 113-14.
\textsuperscript{160} Theophanes AM 6293 - 6295. See also Garland 1999, 90; Herrin 2001, 127.
dominates this side, located just below her titular legend. In this sense, her position is not represented differently than it was previously, aside from the fact that it is repeated on the reverse as well. The customary reverse style prior to the Isaurians was the traditional Byzantine cross. The last time the cross potent on steps was used was during Leo III’s sole reign (717-20) before he crowned his son Constantine V as co-emperor (Fig. 31). This reverse design survives throughout the Isaurian dynasty in the form of the silver miliareia, which first appeared also under Leo III, after he began to include his son’s portrait on the solidus reverse of their joint reign (720-41)\(^\text{161}\) (Fig. 32). While the reduplication of her portrait on the gold is unprecedented in Byzantine coinage, the portraits themselves are identical to each other and remain similar to those of the co-regency, thus promoting a general message of continuity. Irene’s example on the gold coins was not commonly followed, either.\(^\text{162}\)

The inscriptions on these coins provide further insight into imperial messages perpetuating Irene’s new authority. These updates include the following: the spelling of her name is altered; her title is replaced; and new inscriptions appear on the folles (see Table 4). We last saw on the co-regency Class II solidi that Irene’s name had at last been standardized as \(\text{ɪʀɪn}_\text{ʜ}\), with her title as \(\text{ά}_\text{ρονστί}\) (Fig. 24a). On the coins of her sole reign minted at Constantinople, an ‘є’ gets added to the beginning of her name to become \(\text{єɪʀɪн}_\text{ʜ}\)\(^\text{163}\) (Fig. 30a-b). Unfortunately, little other media from Irene’s reign survives, aside from seals. Although these seals contain the same portrait format as the coins themselves, they do not seem to have had the same type of inscriptions so we cannot compare repetition

\(^{161}\) Grierson 1982, 153-6.

\(^{162}\) In the ninth century, Michael I and Leo V briefly included their portraits on both sides during their short terms without colleagues, see Grierson 1982, 154. This connection is additionally interesting, as Grierson 1973, 113 notes the popularity of the cruciform sceptre rising under these two emperors. Leo V forced Michael I to abdicate, so we may have a similar appropriation of power symbols as with Irene and Constantine VI.

\(^{163}\) Whitting 1973, 167; Grierson 1982, 158.
of the spelling and titles present on the coins\textsuperscript{164} (Fig. 33). The spelling change may be attributed to the phonetic process of iotacism,\textsuperscript{165} but otherwise this shift either may not be overtly significant or it may embody a meaning lost to modern audiences.

A more remarkable shift in the legend inscriptions is Irene's new title: \textit{βασιλίσσα}. This detail is ultimately the most important change on Irene's solo \textit{solidi}, rather than the reduplicated portrait as often touted. It is a much clearer break with the iconography we have seen before, and more significantly, it is referenced on both the \textit{solidi} and \textit{folles} for all users to see -- unlike her dual-sided portrait (Fig. 30a-b, 34a). Where on co-regency issues, Irene was referred to as Mother and \textit{Augusta} in a variety of forms (see Tables 1-3), this title of \textit{basilissa} highlights her new imperial role without a colleague.\textsuperscript{166} Granted, Irene had been referred to as one of the \textit{basileis} alongside Constantine on their silver coinage, as was customary for the Isaurian period (Fig. 35). As such, Irene was not referenced individually as \textit{basileus} or \textit{basilissa} on the surviving co-regency \textit{solidi} or \textit{folles}. Rather, she was labelled \textit{Augusta} -- the female equivalent of \textit{Augustus} -- which emphasizes an empress' connection to and dependence on the emperor. As previously noted, this honorific and functional title would have been bestowed upon the empress by her husband and so remained her formal title on the co-regency coins.

Similarly, on their joint \textit{solidi}, Constantine VI was identified as \textit{κωστάντινος βασιλιας'}, with the abbreviated title of \textit{basileus} (Fig. 24b). He was not, however, represented with this title on their \textit{folles}, as Irene would on her solo bronzes (Figs. 25b, 34a). Just as the co-regency \textit{solidus} inscription occasionally indicated his reverse position through the use of a

\textsuperscript{164} Kotsis 2012, 193-4.
\textsuperscript{165} Iotacism is "a change, esp. in Greek, of other vowel sounds to the sound ( (i) ) represented by this letter": Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4th Edition (2010).
\textsuperscript{166} Grierson 1973, 347 claims that Irene's title on the \textit{solidi} is in the dative as "an accompanying acclamation being understood--though in her legislation she terms herself \textit{basileus}." Although use of the dative case for Irene's titles as already been used in earlier co-regency coinage, I am not convinced by its use on her solo coins.
control mark after his title, we often --perhaps even more consistently-- see ø, Ø, or x following *bασιλισσή* on Irene’s solo *solidi*\(^{67}\) (Fig. 30b). As such, these letters may help identify the reverse of Irene’s otherwise identical portraits on the Constantinople *solidi*. The updates to Irene’s identification may have served to separate her from the religiously-tumultuous Isaurian dynasty into which she had married-- where she had been bound as an *Augusta*. Irene’s titular shift from *Augusta* to *basilissa* on her individual coins, therefore, breaks her ties to the emperor, *basileus*, and simultaneously subsumes his title. Thus, the legends of Irene’s coinage bolster her new, potentially tenuous, position as sole ruling entity, *basilissa*.

**Dress and Insignia**

The disappearance of Irene’s co-ruler does not appear to affect the continuity in the imperial wardrobe. Regardless of Constantine’s absence, her physical appearance does not seem to be altered to reflect her new status (Figs. 24a, 30a). The dress and insignia depicted on Irene’s solo coinage present captivating uses of the visual to convey imperial meaning, which are not so distinct on the Constantinople issues. However, the consistency displayed on the coins from Constantinople provide a crucial point of reference for understanding those from Syracuse, which will be discussed later on. As with previous numismatic representations from Constantinople, Irene wears the *loros* and an elaborate crown with a cross on the obverse. She holds the *globus cruciger* in her right hand and the cruciform sceptre in her left, as seen in the co-regency issues. It is, however, interesting to note that the number of points on Irene’s crown changes from four during the co-regency to two during her sole reign, although the significance of this detail is not explicitly clear. Licinia Eudoxia’s (437-455) earlier crown resembles the radiate crown, but notably her later crown

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\(^{67}\) Initial pellets also occur frequently before Irene’s name, although the significance of these marks is not entirely clear in this context.
has two pinnacles – a change which accompanies her new portrayal in the early loros (Figs. 14, 15). Closer in time to Irene, Sophia (573-578) and Leontia (602-610) are also depicted in what appear to be two-pointed crowns (Figs. 1, 2). If anything, the change in Irene’s crown would seem to indicate a move closer to traditional crown types than her previous four-pointed crown.

Rather than a break with the past, the coins visually emphasize a continuity of position, power, and role. Irene’s imperial robes and regalia are not altered substantially on the Constantinople solidi and folles of her sole reign, despite this notable change in authority. She is still represented in the most sacred garment available in the imperial wardrobe. She continues to wear an elaborate crown with pendilia, while also continuing to hold both pillars of Byzantine power, as she has since the co-regency. Therefore, the visual maintenance of these imperial attributes nevertheless commands significant imperial authority. And yet, her coins exhibited several other updates, so the reasoning behind the remarkable consistency – although it may never be known to modern scholars – seems to have been a conscious decision. These recognizable patterns may have served to draw on Irene’s existing visual authority in order to substantiate her unconventional position.

Continuity at Constantinople: Folles

Just as with the co-regency, Irene’s sole reign produced corresponding folles. Although the double-sided portraits of Irene on the solidi were remarkably new, the truly significant shifts in Irene’s coinage include the reintroduction of the 40-nummi ‘M’ on the follis reverse and the reappearance of legend inscriptions on folles, including a potentially shortened form her new ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗ title. Her lower denomination coins may not pack the same visual punch as her duplicated portrait on the solidi, but I argue that the changes to the folles nuance our understanding of Irene even further. The fact that these legends even appear on bronze coins at all during Irene’s reign is intriguing because the people using these coins may not
have even been literate or have seen the abbreviated title used in association with Constantine on the co-regency *solidi*. It is curious that her title should be deemed more important to represent on both denominations of her Constantinople coinage than her reduplicated busts; her title was more integral to articulating her position to all coin-users than repetition of her portrait.

Position and Inscription

Irene’s position on the *follis* obverse remains consistent with that of the *solidi*, as a front-facing bust wearing the *loros* and pinnacle crown, holding the *globus cruciger* and cruciform sceptre (Figs. 30a-b, 34a). The reverses of her solo *folios* are, on the other hand, quite striking in their divergence from those of the co-regency and in their dissimilarity to those of the *solidi*. Instead of Irene’s portrait again on the reverse as with the *solidi*, we see the return to a large ‘M’ denominator of 40 *nummi*, as had been the custom of *folios* prior to the crowded Isaurian portraiture\(^\text{168}\) (Fig. 34b). Anastasius was the first to explicitly mint reverses whose focal design was the denomination mark of value in the fifth century,\(^\text{169}\) (Fig. 36) and it had not been followed since Leo III’s sole reign (717-720)\(^\text{170}\) (Fig. 37). Clearly, the design on Irene’s coins harks back to one of the more defining features of early Byzantine coinage - - even if this mark of value was essentially decorative in this period, as the *follis* was the only bronze denomination in circulation. What is significant, then, about the reappearance of the large ‘M’ is the fact that it replaces any kind of portrait. Irene’s representation has become distanced from that of her Isaurian predecessors as well as from that of her son, thus emphasizing that she is no longer co-regent, presenting her authority as divorced from

\(^{168}\) Grierson 1982, 160.

\(^{169}\) Grierson 1973, 2.

dynastic succession. Further still, her bronze coins strategically tap into well-established Byzantine numismatic customs rather than repeating her own image.

Here again we seem to have evidence for audience awareness: the identical busts reiterate her new authoritative status as sole ruler to a gold-using crowd, a message which may have been more critical to convey to those users than to the common people. As a reminder, the bronze users had not necessarily seen the power ambiguity created by the inscriptions and Constantine’s *akakia* on the Class II *solidi* (Figs. 24a-b, 25a-b). The narrative expressed by the *folles* was effectively one of continuous augmentation of Irene’s authority: Constantine had been relegated to the reverse until he simply did not appear at all. The general public may have been aware of this large ‘M’ reverse type, if coins of Leo III’s early reign lingered in circulation, but this familiarity may not have been universal. Thus, it is unclear what parallels Irene’s coinage may have tried to make, and the motivations behind this visual transition may never be known with certainty. Nevertheless, the reverse style of the coins produced during Irene’s sole reign would remain the standard for the next two decades.\(^\text{171}\) Clearly the fact that a woman ruled Byzantium in her own right was not an inhibiting factor in subsequent coinage style.

In addition, even though the denominational ‘M’ has been enlarged, the other lettered markings which used to appear beneath the groundline along with the ‘M’ on the co-regency coins appear on Irene’s solo coins in a rearranged and expanded fashion (Figs. 25b, 34b). Although ‘X’ and ‘N’ appear on some of the earlier coins in this study as shorthand accessory symbols formerly indicating regnal dates,\(^\text{172}\) Irene’s *folles* implement a return to the more elaborate ‘XXX’ and ‘NNN’.\(^\text{173}\) These were last used functionally under

\(^{171}\) Grierson 1982, 164.  
\(^{172}\) See Grierson 1982, 20 for more information.  
\(^{173}\) Goodacre 1957, 155 posits these letters as representing Χριστός νικχ repeated three times. This interpretation does not seem to have been picked up by the more prominent Byzantine scholars of the later 20th century, and it seems like a stretch to me, given the earlier dating connections.
Justinian II, although Leo III appropriated the design in an ornamental way\(^\text{174}\) (Figs. 38, 37).

Irene’s longer, triple mark forms not only conform more closely to the dating pattern from which these letters originally derived, but they also refer back to customary use prior to crowded Isaurian portraiture.\(^\text{175}\) In this sense, Irene’s coins demonstrate yet again an awareness of symbolic continuity of the past. This re-installment of longer -- albeit decorative, rather than functional-- field marks accompanies the re-installment of the large ‘M’ on Irene’s bronzes, and together this reverse design definitively replaces traces of Irene’s direct predecessors in favor of more traditional numismatic preferences. While this transition may have been an intentional step away from the Isaurian emperors immediately preceding Irene, it seems even more likely that a key strategy for garnering support for Irene’s unconventional independent rule may have been a return to conventional numismatic iconography. This significant shift toward earlier numismatic trends is made nonetheless more intriguing since it was brought about by the first Byzantine female emperor.

What is even more impressive with the appearance of Irene’s new title on the \textit{solidi} is its debut as a legend inscription on the corresponding \textit{folles} from Constantinople. For the first time since Leo III and Constantine V (720-741), we see a titular heading on bronze coins (Fig. 37). It appears as \textit{εἰρινὴ \πηλας'}, where we can clearly see the new spelling of her name, and perhaps a shortened form of her new title \textit{basiliissa} (Fig. 34b). In fact, this abbreviation looks exactly the same as it had when associated with Constantine VI on the co-regency coins (Fig. 25a). As such, the title is not a necessarily gendered form. The feminized \textit{basiliissa} seems logical, as it would correspond with the \textit{solidi} inscriptions. However, we also know that Irene occasionally signed her title as the masculine \textit{basileus} on

\(^{174}\) Grierson 1982, 154.
\(^{175}\) Grierson 1982, 164.
Therefore, the abbreviation creates a degree of ambiguity. Where literate gold users would have seen basilissa clearly spelled out on their coins, literate bronze users received more room for interpretation, thus blurring the lines between εἰρήνας and constant tινοςβας'. The need to convey Irene’s new status was apparently considered vital to include even on the folles. It was not enough to remove Constantine’s portrait from the coins entirely, but legends were added in order to reiterate Irene’s new authority as kingly ruler of Byzantium.

The visual changes which occur on Irene’s solo bronzes are also accompanied by a material change: the weight of the folles increases. Grierson speaks to the fluctuation of these measurements, positing that the follis weighed around five grams in the late-eighth century. Although that number was certainly not static, what we see at that time is, in fact, a decreased follis during the co-regency and an increased follis beyond this proposed mean weight under Irene’s sole rule. Grierson goes so far as to say that all of his examples weighed six grams, or double those of the co-regency. As shown in Table 5, Irene’s sole folles are remarkably heavier than those of the co-regency -- whether twice as heavy is difficult to surmise from the small sample size available to me. Upon weighing the coins at MOA, this trend generally holds true: her folles are certainly heavier than those of the co-regency, but not so radically different from those of Leo IV and Constantine (775-780).

For a potential explanation, I return to Theophanes’ account in which Irene “remitted the civic taxes for inhabitants of Byzantium” in 801. Perhaps then, the increased folles weights indicate substantial audience awareness: popular support could be obtained if

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177 Grierson 1982, 155.
178 Grierson 1973, 347.
179 I weighed the coins in a tray on an electronic scale and determined the weights after zeroing the scale topped by the tray. It is unfortunately difficult to assess a meaningful standard deviation from these weights, as my sample size was rather small.
180 AM 6293. Mango and Scott note the choice to translate ἐκούφισεν as ‘cancelled’ instead of ‘reduced’ based on prior ambiguity in AM 6287. This action has been highly criticized by scholars.
subjects were paying less in taxes and if their coins possessed greater value.\textsuperscript{181} This difference matters because bronze users could have noticed a tangible difference between Irene’s solo coins and those which were issued a few years earlier. Although it is difficult to assign this change to Irene’s agency, the production of 	extit{folles} which looked and felt like more traditional bronzes would have undoubtedly been noticeable, and likely favorable, to the people.

\textbf{Playing the Field at Syracuse: Overview}

As we have seen, the numismatic iconography has been adapted at Constantinople to suit Irene’s new position, and these details get modified even further at Syracuse. The fact that Constantinople and the Syracuse issues employ different imagery illustrates how selective and nuanced these messages and intended audiences could be. However, one of the largest changes to coin production during Irene’s sole reign occurs on a much bigger scale: the reactivation of the mint at Syracuse, on the island of Sicily. The fact that we even have evidence at all for mint production at Syracuse is striking. Grierson suggests that the mints in the West operated on their own, with some designs mirroring the ones at Constantinople and others acting independently and innovatively.\textsuperscript{182} Not only was Sicily far to the west of the seat of power at Constantinople, but its additional insularity as an island may have impacted the types of coins and imperial messages produced there.

Gold coinage from Sicily from the second half of Leo III’s reign onwards, although generally rare, seems to have been in line with the Constantinopolitan type of busts on each

\textsuperscript{181} Granted, I did not analyze the metallic content of these specimens, so it is possible that a less valuable element was added to increase the weight rather than bronze itself, but the heaviness may have boosted public trust in the perceived coin value regardless of actual value.

\textsuperscript{182} Grierson 1982, 156. Unfortunately, we do not have provenanced examples of Irene’s Syracusan solidi to fully interpret where these coins circulated and for which geographic audience they were intended.
side, but with higher reliefs. A fair amount of Constantine V’s *solidi* from Sicily survive, but none from Leo IV’s sole reign – as far as we know – and as we have seen, none from Constantine VI’s joint rule with his father or his mother. Therefore, the direct precedents of Irene’s Syracusan coinage are not her son or husband, but going back further into the dynasty. We know of two different types of *solidi* from Sicily during Irene’s sole reign, which is intriguing because multiple denominational types from Constantinople do not exist from any point during Irene’s reign. Granted, these Sicilian types are extremely rare, but they provide compelling comparisons with the ones from Constantinople.

Similarly, gaps in mint production on Sicily seem to have also characterized the bronze coinage of the Isaurian dynasty. We have no known examples from the co-regency, as demonstrated in the previous chapters. Irene does not appear to have bronze coins from Syracuse during her sole reign (or any portion of her reign, for that matter), so they may have considered unnecessary under her rule. The motives for reopening of the mint under Irene may never be known for certain, but it is certainly compelling that she is nevertheless linked with the minting practices of earlier Isaurian emperors. This action may have, in turn, played into a wider geographic dissemination of Irene’s new status as *basilissa*. Irene’s sole reign yields new *solidus* designs from a newly-reopened mint, but it does not extend to *follis* production.

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183 Grierson 1982, 165-6. He states that this workmanship helps identify these coins from those at Constantinople, even if the quality of gold does not seem to be as high on Sicily. He adds that the weights and legends of these coins were inconsistent and produced with less care as the century went on.

184 Grierson 1982, 166.

185 Grierson 1982, 166-7. Grierson suggests that they were minted on an as-needed basis, and that the poor workmanship implies that they were not particularly special issues.
Playing the Field at Syracuse: *Solidi*, Class I

Position and Inscription

As with the Constantinople *solidi*, the obverse and reverse of the Syracuse *solidi* both contain Irene’s portrait (Figs. 39a-b). In this way, Irene’s coinage maintained consistency with designs from the East (Figs. 30a-b). The key difference in Irene’s position on this first Syracusan issue is a subtle shift from bust to seated on the obverse, only made visible by the addition of two small curved lines protruding from behind Irene’s shoulders, which suggest a throne. These lines recall the last *follis* issue of Leo IV and Constantine seated on a lyre-backed throne (Fig. 3a). Since the emperors seated on that throne were depicted on the obverse, this detail might point to the identification as the obverse as well for Irene’s coinage. Furthermore, Grierson states that the throne implies that this issue was the earlier of the two Sicilian issues.\(^{186}\) This throne, which had formerly signified Leo and Constantine’s recent victory, may further point to Irene’s complete absorption of her son and former colleague’s imperial authority, as it appropriates his final *solidus* design prior to Irene. This detail demonstrates the first of many limits Irene’s iconography – and perhaps by extension, her authority – transcended.

One of the most prominent contrasts between the two classes of Irene’s *solidi* minted in Syracuse is the differing inscriptions. The Class I *solidi* legend appears as ΙΡΕΝ ΑΡΟΣ (Fig. 39a). This arrangement is noteworthy because of its dissimilarity to the Constantinople *solidi* ΕΙΡΙΝΗ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗ (Fig. 30a), yet it has an overwhelming link with the Class II co-regency inscription ΙΡΙΝΗ ΑΡΟΣΤΙ (Fig. 24a). Here, we see neither the new *basilissa* title nor the ‘ε’ prefixed to Irene’s name. Instead, we find what appears to be essentially an abbreviated

\(^{186}\) Grierson 1973, 347-8. He does not elaborate on this chronological identification. No scholar has challenged this interpretation, or even discussed it much at all. I am hesitant to accept this association without further evidence, in light of the other, more striking iconographic shifts.
form of her final co-regency titulature. Although the spelling is slightly altered, the similarity is
difficult to overlook. On the reverse, the inscription is shortened further still to ἀροῦς, with
the space where Irene’s name would customarily be located being consumed by her large
cross potent (Fig. 39b). In a sense, these observations create ambiguity surrounding the
dating of this issue. It is possible that these coins actually date earlier – perhaps her
reduplicated portrait was a minting experiment conducted during the co-regency out on
Sicily, far away from the capital. Conversely, these coins may in fact be properly assigned to
Irene’s sole reign, during which time the coins exhibited clear links to Constantine VI but
were beginning to transition away from that connection by introducing a new portrait.
Regardless, Grierson did not elaborate on his methodology for the dating, and evidence to
challenge his identification has not been fully brought to light. For the time being, I accept
this categorization – and its puzzling implications – and will proceed with my analysis as
such.

Dress and Insignia

The Syracuse Class I soliūs reveals a shocking use of the iconographic elements this
thesis has been tracing. As with the coins from Constantinople, Irene wears the two-pointed
crown with pendilia (Figs. 30a-b, 39a-b). Her effigy also continues to wear the sacred loros –
but only on the reverse. For the first time in Irene’s reign, we see a change in her imperial
costume: the obverse now represents the empress in the chlamys. Irene, sole emperor, is at
last portrayed with regalia formerly confined to her masculine predecessors. This detail is
thought-provoking, as it is difficult to know whether the limits of Irene’s military capabilities –
and thereby representation in the chlamys – were extended substantially during her period
as sole ruler. At the very least, she was not depicted with any colleague for whom
representation in the chlamys might cause tension. As with the elements already discussed,
Irene’s dress on the Class I solidi from Syracuse maintains some connections both with the
co-regency and her Constantinople *solidi*, portrayal in the *chlamys* on obverse is new. On the one hand, it suggests additional appropriation of Constantine’s power. On the other hand, it conveys her as a more traditional Byzantine emperor: Leo IV and Constantine VI were both dressed in the *chlamys* and seated in the lyre-backed throne on their final issue (Fig. 3a). In this sense, Irene’s design is simply mirroring that obverse as fits her current circumstances; even more so the *chlamys* draws attention to her connection with *chlamys*-clad emperors Leo III (717-741) and Constantine V (741-775), who had last minted at Syracuse (Figs. 40, 41).

Similarly, Irene is now depicted holding the *akakia* in her left hand on the obverse (Fig. 39a). This representation certainly recalls that of Constantine VI on the final phase of co-regency *solidi* (Fig. 24b). This transition would seem to symbolize her complete takeover of power from Constantine VI, who was last represented holding the *akakia*, dressed in the *chlamys*. The presence of the *akakia* does, however, mean that Irene’s cruciform sceptre was replaced. This observation is unusual, since even during her time in exile, Irene’s portrait still clung to its sceptre. Therefore, this change may indicate that the *akakia* commanded significant authority, perhaps even more so than the cruciform sceptre. In addition, this object was likewise also held on coins of Leo III also minted at Syracuse, and thus Irene’s representation connects back to that image.

However, Leo III and Constantine V were also depicted holding the *globus cruciger* or occasionally the cross potent (Figs. 40, 41), whereas Irene no longer appears to hold the *globus cruciger* on the Class I obverse (Fig. 39a). To hold just the *akakia* on the obverse

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187 Licinia Eudoxia (437-455) is depicted in the *chlamys* in the earlier issue and the *loros* in the later issue. In this sense, female portrayal in the *chlamys* is not entirely unprecedented. It is possible that the survival of this Western image influenced its appearance on Irene’s Sicilian issues based on geographic proximity. However, I maintain that the primary connection to be made here is to the Byzantine imperial portraiture.

188 It should be noted that the Constantinople issues of these former rulers reflect the same portraits as at Syracuse.
may be interpreted as, on the one hand, a somewhat less authoritative representation of
Irene than her predecessors; on the other hand, this choice may imply a commanding
statement on Irene’s unprecedented position, in which she no longer requires the *globus
cruciger* or the cruciform sceptre to assert her power. However, this analysis only applies to
the Syracusan issue, which may fall into the realm of minting experimentation in the West,
away from a closer imperial eye at Constantinople.

On the reverse of this issue, Irene still does not hold the cruciform sceptre or the
*globus cruciger*. Rather, she is portrayed with the cross potent on steps (Fig. 39b), which
Grierson identifies as the reverse because Nicephorus I holds this item on *solidus* obverses
directly after Irene’s reign.189 I am not fully certain that we can retroject this identification
onto Irene’s sole coinage, even if it does immediately precede that of Nicephorus I. Although
I ultimately accept this identification, I substantiate it with the throne analysis from earlier.
The cross potent also appears on Leo III and Constantine V’s issues from Constantinople
and Syracuse. In particular, it is depicted in the right hand of a *loros*-clad Leo III on the
reverse of Constantine V’s *solidi*, i.e. the first instance where the deceased Isaurian emperor
is placed on the reverse (Fig. 41).190 Irene’s representation on the reverse here in the *loros
and with the cross potent not only falls in line with the most recent Sicilian coinage but also
additionally supports the identification with this side as the reverse based on prior patterns.
Again, Irene’s image is innovative as a female emperor, but these modifications actually
serve to represent her in a more traditional imperial form.

189 1973, 348.
190 Leo III’s smaller gold denominations – the *tremissis* and *semissis*, which had fallen out of use by
Irene’s time – also contain the cross potent.
Playing the Field at Syracuse: *Solidi*, Class II

**Position and Inscription**

In keeping with all of her solo coin designs, Irene’s portrait is located on both the obverse and reverse.\(^1\) However, in this issue, Irene is no longer seated on the lyre-backed throne. In fact, the second class of Syracusan *solidi* more closely resemble their Constantinopolitan counterparts in most aspects (Figs. 30a-b). Irene resumes her name spelling and title as εἰρίνη ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΙ. The coin example Grierson provides contains an incomplete reverse inscription of ]ΝΗ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣ[ . The shortened name allows room for the cross potent that Irene holds. Notably, the cross potent on this issue is smaller than that on the Class I *solidus* and thereby creates some space to squeeze her name in, unlike on the previous issue (Fig. 39b). It is unclear whether the reverse inscription was intended to mirror that of the obverse, although this explanation is certainly plausible when compared with the Constantinople *solidi* inscriptions which are nearly identical. Unfortunately, there are so few known examples of Irene’s Sicilian *solidi* of either class that extensive comparisons cannot be made. There are not enough comparanda to determine whether the spelling ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΙ was intentionally different than usual ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗ or whether there was any uniformity with respect to the size of the cross potent and including Irene’s name or whether control marks were used to distinguish sides.

**Dress and Insignia**

In many respects, as before, the Class II *solidi* from Syracuse parallel those from Constantinople (Figs. 30a-b). Irene wears the same pinnacled crown and the *loros*. The

\(^{1}\) For an image, see DOC 4 under Irene. Note from the Dumbarton Oaks Curator states that this item belongs to a private collection and was photographed for the published catalogue only (personal communication).
main difference in insignia appears to be that on the obverse, Irene holds the *globus cruciger* in her right hand as we have seen many times, whereas on the reverse, Irene holds the cross potent on steps. Her left hand, in contrast, is not shown on either side. Unlike the Class I *solidi*, Irene is not shown holding the *akakia* on either side (Fig. 39a-b). Curiously, the obverse contrasts with the Class Ib co-regency coins, where Irene lost the *globus cruciger* but retained the cruciform sceptre (Fig. 9a); here we see the *basilissa* holding the *globus* but not the sceptre. In addition, Irene is represented holding the cruciform sceptre on her solo coins from Constantinople but not on either of the issues from Syracuse. These observations further reiterate my point that we cannot interpret the cruciform sceptre as essential to Byzantine female authority. This subtraction also indicates the flexibility of iconography available in Sicily that was perhaps not the case at Constantinople. Moreover, the iconographic evidence provided by the Class II coins allows for a more secure date to Irene’s sole reign based on the striking similarity to those of Constantinople; it may even be possible that the first issue was not well received in the capital to the point that a new, more compatible issue was ordered.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the coinage of Irene’s sole reign produces compelling ties to and breaks from her imperial predecessors. Scholarship most often remarks on Irene’s reduplicated portrait on her issues, and while this shift is completely unprecedented as the first female emperor of Byzantium, I have argued that the iconographic details within these repeated portraits strive to connect Irene more strongly with traditional Byzantine rule, rather than making a declaration of difference. She either wears the same *loros* as she has been wearing, or she wears the more traditional garment of an emperor, the *chlamys*; she either possess the same *globus cruciger* and cruciform sceptre insignia of Byzantine authority she had customarily held, or she incorporates the formerly traditional *akakia* and cross potent; lastly,
she takes on the new title of *basilissa*, which more closely aligns with the male emperor title *basileus*. The iconography employed on her coins taps into the available numismatic repertoire in order to assemble the pieces in such a way that suggest her new status using visual language which the public could discern. The fact that Irene’s coinage can play around with the numismatic iconography across the two mints of Constantinople and Syracuse indicates additional awareness of the power of coins to convey messages. Moreover, these facts work together to solidify the empress’ persona which had begun during her time as co-regent – we do not see a marked break with the iconography or imperial position, but rather the construction of a fully traditional position that stands in contrast to the way historiography has treated Irene’s reign.
6. Conclusion: re-writing the story of Irene

Modern reception of Empress Irene is mixed. The narrative perpetuated about her is one of a fiercely active agent in Byzantine history. The ancient sources, namely Theophanes the Confessor, record the events which occurred under her co-regency and which would launch her into the spotlight as the first female emperor of Byzantium. Scholars have picked up on this literature and subsequently cast her as anywhere from a power-hungry mother to an emblem of feminine power. Where these interpretations have erred is in their neglect of the primacy of material, visual culture. Coins have more often than not been used to reinforce these literary-based histories; coin typologies lack the analytic synthesis which can be generated from such assemblages.

Irene serves as a valuable case study for what ought to be a widespread approach to constructing imperial authority. Her coinage does not show: the restoration of icon worship, her complete removal of power during exile, or a violent seizure of the throne. None of these events which have often been deemed primary features of Irene’s reign are reflected in the officially-issued coinage. This observation indicates that the issuing authority did not conceive of Irene’s power in the same way as the literary sources. Instead, according to the imperial perspective on the coins, Irene ascended to sole power in a gradual manner. The *solidus* and *follis* denominations manifest this transition in slightly different ways, which reveals a unified imperial view aimed at specific audiences. More importantly, the coins construct her authority through iconographic customs, which essentially portray Irene as a traditional Byzantine emperor.

Upon analyzing the coins issued during Empress Irene’s co-regency with Emperor Constantine VI, the visual transformation across the three distinct issues is unmistakable. Irene’s representation develops from her as ‘junior’ colleague, *S IRIN AVI* MITHR, on the early issues to her as the sole obverse figure as *IRINH AROVSTI* on their last series.
Constantine, as ‘senior’ Augustus, is consistently referred to on the coins as constantinios, with the addition of ἄσ in the third issue. His image consists of the ancestral, and formerly military, chlamys. Her image revives iconographic attributes of the loros and cruciform sceptre – which had not been represented on coins since the seventh century – although their origins date back to the Roman era. Both rulers are portrayed holding the globus cruciger, universal signifier of Byzantine power; a point which is emphasized by its initial presence, its striking absence, and its noteworthy return throughout the issues. Although Constantine is eventually depicted with the akakia on solidi, this insignia fails to counteract his perpetually beardless face or his definitive relegation to the reverse on the folles of the same series. Even during the period of his mother’s exile, the emperor does not completely override her imperial authority on coins. In fact, it would appear that Irene’s continued presence serves to augment her visual authority further still on the final co-regency issue.

On the coinage minted under her sole reign, Irene is represented in many ways the same as she had been on the co-regency issues, with the differences appearing deliberate. The fact that the mint of Syracuse is reopened at this time has been downplayed throughout scholarship, with the focus of interest more often being Irene’s reduplicated image. While the latter detail is certainly worth noting, the ability to adapt the iconography to a set of portraits from Syracuse in addition to those from Constantinople enhances the significance of the reduplicated images which survive from Irene’s reign. Her titles now range from Ἰρὲν ἄγιστο to Ἐἰρηνὴ βασίλισσὴ to Ἡρὶ ἄσ on Class I Syracusan solidi, on Constantinopolitan and Class II Syracusan solidi, and remarkably on Constantinopolitan folles, respectively. These types of differences appear among the costumes and insignia as well, where we see Irene now appearing in the chlamys in one series from Syracuse, and occasionally holding the akakia or cross potent on steps at Syracuse in place of the globus cruciger and cruciform sceptre of Constantinople portraits. While the iconographic mainstays of the crown, loros, and insignia suggest a strong degree of continuity with Irene’s image as it has
been constructed on coins throughout her whole reign, the instances in which Irene is portrayed with elements outside of her typical repertoire are not unusual, but rather draw on iconography available to traditional Byzantine emperors.

Through the oft-neglected numismatic evidence, I have demonstrated that Irene as a historical figure need not be read as any of the literary-based personas which have been circulated about her, but rather she ought to be treated as the traditional emperor of Byzantium her coins proclaimed her to be. The audiences engaging with these coins certainly varied, and the coins were minted to speak to those populations. Whether or not the public was aware of the palace intrigue at play throughout the last-quarter of the eighth century, and whether or not we maintain the text-based framework for dating of the series, the coins reflect these political breaks so clearly that ancient and modern viewers can readily understand the visual changes that occur throughout this twenty-two year period. Reiterating this material perspective is the fact that not every detail of the historical record is reflected on the coins themselves, e.g., the restoration of icon worship in 787. As far as the numismatic record is concerned, this event is entirely unknown; users of coins of either denomination would have no numismatic indication that icons were once again permitted in the Byzantine visual repertoire.

Where Irene is often portrayed as having violently seized the throne in 797, the coins of the co-regency demonstrate, instead, that Irene had been accumulating strength and power over Constantine from the very beginning of their joint rule. I do not deny the hand Irene may have played in this *coup d'etat*, but I aim to complicate the traditional narrative by adding the imperial perspective, through its issued coinage, to show that this event was the culmination of a decades-long imperial struggle with her son. Furthermore, the coinage minted under Irene as sole emperor maintains many of the visual patterns established during the co-regency, but the prodigious updates serve to perpetuate new claims of Irene’s sole power. The reconfigurations of numismatic iconography clearly demonstrate an imperial
consciousness of the utility of coins as disseminators of those messages. Irene delivered such a striking performance on the coinage that, even when she was deposed, the empress was not forgotten.
Bibliography


Table 1: Pre-exile coins, based on data drawn from Grierson DOC vol. 3 (1973), the American Numismatic Society, and the Rachel and David Herma Collection of Byzantine Coins.

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### Constantinople

#### SOLIDUS

**Class I**

(a) Irene holds gl. or. in r. hand; inscr. begins on rev.

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### FOLLIS

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Swiss Collection, 1998; W. H. 6, T. 10, R. —

Greeks and Romans, 1882.

Bequest of Robert F. Knapp, April 1927.
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### Constantineople

#### SOLIDUS

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| ANS 1944 105 1450 | DOC 2a | AV solidus | 795-792 | 4.44 g | 6 | | | E.T. Newell Coll. |
| BMC 1 | | | | | | | | |
| ANS 1946 51 56 | DOC 2a | AV solidus | 795-792 | 4.41 g | 6 | | | H.R. Bier Collection |
| BMC 1 | | | | | | | | |
| ANS 1908 134 247 | DOC 2a | AV solidus | 795-792 | 4.47 g | 6 | | | Purchased from J. P. Barry |
| BMC 1 | | | | | | | | Collection |

### Constantineople

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| DOC 6.3 | AE follis | 795-792 | 2.23 g | | | | | Swiss Collection 1896 |
| DOC 6.4 | AE follis | 795-792 | 1.78 g | | | | | Swiss Collection 1896 |
| DOC 6.5 | AE follis | 795-792 | 1.68 g | | | | | Whitemore |

The lower part of this coin is corroded, so that one cannot see whether a globe-crozier was present or not.
Table 3: Post-exile coins, based on data drawn from Grigson DOC vol. 3 (1972), the American Numismatic Society, and the Rachel and David Herman Collection of Byzantine Coins.

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**ANS 1944.160.16214**
- **DOC 7.7**
  - AE tokens: 780-797
  - Weight: 2.53 g
  - 6
  - Bequest of E.T. Niewall

**ANS 1944.160.16215**
- **DOC 7.7**
  - AE tokens: 780-797
  - Weight: 2.63 g
  - 6
  - Bequest of E.T. Niewall

**ANS 1944.160.16216**
- **DOC 7.7**
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  - Weight: 2.56 g
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  - Bequest of E.T. Niewall

**ANS 1984.112.2791**
- **DOC 7.5**
  - AE tokens: 782-797
  - Weight: 2.35 g
  - 6
  - Gift of David Milrod M.D.
  - Dates: 2013

**ANS 1984.112.2792**
- **DOC 7.5**
  - AE tokens: 782-797
  - Weight: 1.45 g
  - 6
  - Gift of David Milrod M.D.
  - Dates: 2014

**ANS 1984.112.2793**
- **DOC 7.5**
  - AE tokens: 782-797
  - Weight: 1.98 g
  - 6
  - Gift of David Milrod M.D.
  - Dates: 2016

**DOC 7.5**
- **ANS 1997.31.106**
  - AE tokens: 780-797
  - Weight: 2.45 g
  - 6
  - 10mm

**MOA 2005.1675**
- **DOC 7.5**
  - AE tokens: 782-797
  - Weight: 2.38 g
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  - The Rachel and David Hofman Collection
  - Date: 2013

**MOA 2005.10291**
- **DOC 7.5**
  - AE tokens: 782-797
  - Weight: 2.56 g
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  - The Rachel and David Hofman Collection
  - Date: 2013

**MOA 2005.10231**
- **DOC 7.5**
  - AE tokens: 782-797
  - Weight: 2.48 g
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  - The Rachel and David Hofman Collection
  - Date: 2013
Table 4: Irene solo coins, based on data drawn from Grierson, "GOC" vol. 3 (1973), the American Numismatic Society, and the Rachel and David Herman Collection of Byzantine Coins

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<td>Irene solo coins, based on data drawn from Grierson, &quot;GOC&quot; vol. 3 (1973).</td>
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<td>OOC ’13</td>
<td>AV solidus</td>
<td>T17-002</td>
<td>4.05 g</td>
<td>Irene solo coins, based on data drawn from Grierson, &quot;GOC&quot; vol. 3 (1973).</td>
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<table>
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<th>FOLLIS</th>
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<td>OGC ’1a</td>
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Table 5: Follis weights from 775 to 802, based on data drawn from Grierson DOC vol. 3 (1973), the American Numismatic Society, and the Rachel and David Herman Collection of Byzantine Coins.

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<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Mean weight (g)</th>
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<td>Leo IV / Constantine VI</td>
<td>n = 3</td>
<td>4.2666666667</td>
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<tr>
<td>Co-regency, pre-exile</td>
<td>n = 6</td>
<td>2.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Co-regency, exile</td>
<td>n = 5</td>
<td>2.228</td>
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<td>Co-regency, post-exile</td>
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<td>2.411538462</td>
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<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>n = 6</td>
<td>5.8433333333</td>
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2.

3a. 3b.
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