IMPERIAL SAINTHOOD IN BYZANTIUM:
A PRELIMINARY INQUIRY

RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

Following the establishment of an imperial rank during the transformative period marking the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire, the first emperors had their status elevated by the Roman Senate, deifying them and forging cults, thereby sanctifying their rule.¹ Christianity’s emergence from the imperial periphery in the first century of the common era provided a formidable challenge not merely to imperial

¹ It is important to note here the various debates surrounding emperor worship and imperial cults in the Roman Empire. Ittai Gradel problematizes how some view pre-Christian Roman History vis-à-vis religion and politics saying, “Unlike its usage in modern scholarship, ‘the imperial cult’ had no category of its own in the ancient world. Both our concepts of religion and politics, and thus the dichotomy between them, are in fact modern inventions. Neither Greek nor Latin had any pre-Christian term for ‘religion’ or ‘politics’ in our sense of the word. Religio meant reverence, conscientiousness, and diligence towards superiors, commonly but not exclusively the gods: ‘To be religiosus is not merely to hold the sanctity of the gods in great respect, but also to be dutifully obliging (officiosus) towards men’, as a Roman grammarian stated. In another, narrower sense, the word could be used collectively of the rites and ceremonies of divine worship, and of everything connected with such worship (synonymous with res divinæ as opposed to res humanae). Pre-Christian religio was not concerned with inward, personal virtues, such as belief, but with outward behaviour and attitude; in other words, with observance rather than faith, and with action rather than feeling. This does not, of course, amount to saying that pagan worshippers did not experience personal emotions in connection with their worship, merely that this aspect was only marginally relevant, if at all, to the concept and meaning of religio. The meaning of this word in the modern sense as a religious system encompassing both action—rituals—and philosophy—theology, dogmas, cosmology, mythology—belongs to late antiquity and was developed specifically in connection with religio Christiana, Christianity.” Source: Ittai Gradel, Emperor Worship and Roman Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.
rule, but to the imperial office itself. Christians rejected the worship of, and sacrificial offerings to, the Roman emperors choosing imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom rather than submitting to serving, or recognizing, their cults. After three centuries of repression, the emergence of Constantine as the victor in the struggle of succession paved the way for the toleration and eventual legalization of Christianity as a recognized faith in the Roman Empire.

Christianity’s acceptance as the official imperial religion ultimately meant that the imperial office itself underwent significant transformations. The new Christian Roman emperors were no longer divine in the way the pre-Christian Roman’s understood imperial divinity.² Rather, the Christian emperors took on the role of benefactors, protectors, and defenders of Christendom from enemies both within and outside the imperial borders. Constantine and his mother, Helen, were elevated after their deaths to sainthood and cults emerged around their veneration. Other emperors and imperial officers were recognized as saints or were honored with special status depending on their lives and their defense of Christianity from heresy and enemies. The imperial office, while no longer divine in its own right, became an office where a ruler whose life and works supported, nurtured, and defended the Christian faith could be sanctified.

This short article is a preliminary inquiry into imperial sainthood in the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. How did an emperor become a saint? What was the model of sainthood for emperors and empresses? Starting with the imperial saint par excellence, Constantine the Great serves as the most important, noteworthy, and model saintly emperor. Through an exploration of the life and attitudes related to Saint Constantine, we will then turn to the emperor Justinian, who was not recognized as a saint throughout Byzantine history. The reasons and rationales will be explored, and I believe they will reveal some fascinating aspects of how the Church understood

² Regarding the special case of Caesar, Ittai Gradel writes, “To Appian, the custom of deifying dead emperors began with Caesar. That is a simplified view which is only half right. Caesar’s case was a special one. His divine state honours were decreed by the Senate in his lifetime; true, they were not implemented before his death, but this was because he was murdered so soon after the passing of these decrees. Only the formation of the second triumvirate ensured his status as a state god. On the one hand, this status shed immense prestige on his heir, young Octavian, now divi filius on the other hand, Caesar’s case was an embarrassment to the later Augustan settlement and its stress on moderatio. So though Divus Julius was an unquestioned god of Rome, with state priest and public temple in the forum, he was, paradoxically, not the first in the line of Divi as it was construed in the state cult of the empire. Caesar’s cult under Augustus and later was what we may term ‘selfcontained’; only his priest and the cult personnel attached to his temple appear to have been involved in his state worship.” Source: Ittai Gradel, Emperor Worship and Roman Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 262-263.
saintliness and what made an emperor/empress worthy of sainthood. Finally, I will very briefly address other notable imperial saints and their lives. This article is a first attempt to try to understand the complex political, theological, and social aspects that led to the recognition of sainthood for some emperors and empresses while others were denied that honor and status.\(^3\)

**BYZANTIUM: HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Before analyzing and attempting to answer the aforementioned questions, a very short introduction to the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire will be helpful to readers. First, it is important to note that the people of what we now call the Byzantine Empire never referred to themselves as “Byzantine” nor to their polity as an “emprise.” Rather, the people referred to themselves as Romans. Long after the Byzantine Empire had disappeared, Ottomans referred to the Eastern Orthodox Christian population, which included Greeks, Bulgarians, Romanians, and Orthodox Christian Arabs, as the Rum Millet or “Roman nation.” Greek speaking peoples under the Ottoman Empire still referred to themselves as Romans up until the nineteenth, and in some cases, the twentieth century. The name Byzantine comes from Byzantion, the ancient Greek city that would eventually be renamed Constantinople (in honor of the emperor Constantine the Great) and is known today as Istanbul (a name some argue derives from the Greek eis tin poli or “to the city”).

Chronologically speaking, the Roman Republic was founded in 509 B.C.E. and lasted until 27 B.C.E. when Gaius Octavius, the adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar, was elevated to Augustus, thus marking the transition to the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire would be united until the emperor Diocletian divided it in 286 C.E. into East and West and into four parts (tetarchy) in 293 C.E. After a few decades, Constantine emerged victorious in the power struggles and civil wars that consumed the empire, emerging victorious as the sole emperor after the Battle of Chrysopolis in 324 C.E. Constantine legalized Christianity, ending the centuries of Roman persecution of Christians and moved the capital of the Roman Empire to

\(^3\) It should be noted here the enormous complexity in taking a profound concept such as sainthood and trying not only to understand it theologically but also socio-politically and historically by engaging scholarly works related to this topic. The issue here is to carefully thread the needle between a tradition that recognizes many of these emperors and empresses as saints, worthy of commemoration and veneration, and the academic work of historians who might dispute the accuracy and veracity of the hagiographical depictions of these emperors/empresses.

Byzantium, “New Rome,” in 330 C.E. Subsequent emperors of the Eastern Roman Empire like Theodosius I and Justinian enlarged, enhanced, and expanded the power of the empire and the church. While the eastern part of the empire was thriving, the west was succumbing to numerous invasions and political instability. The Western Roman Empire, divided for the final time under Theodosius I in 395 C.E. finally fell in 476 C.E. The Eastern Roman Empire would thrive from 395 C.E. until 1453 C.E.

Figure 1: The Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire at its peak under Justinian I in 555 C.E. Source: Wikimedia.

The Eastern Roman Empire, with its capital in Constantinople, became an important center of learning, trade, and the arts. It not only connected Europe, Africa, and Asia but its achievements and contributions shaped the modern world.\(^5\) Constantinople was also the seat of the Patriarch of Constantinople, one of the five bishops of the Great or “catholic” Church.\(^6\) Along with the other Patriarchs in Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria, they together comprised the Pentarchy. The Patriarch of Rome was the “first among equals” given Rome’s historic importance. In 1054 C.E., theological and political differences came to a head when Cardinal Humbert, representing the Patriarch of Rome excommunicated the


\(^6\) Note here the small “c” to denote the “universal” church but not the Roman Catholic Church that would emerge after the Great Schism in 1054 C.E.
Patriarch of Constantinople.\(^7\) Thus, the East-West or Great Schism occurred, leading to the creation of the Roman Catholic Church, led by the Pope (Patriarch) in Rome and the Eastern Orthodox Church, with the Patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople which took the title “first among equals.” This division within Christendom was cemented when Latin Crusaders sacked Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade in 1204 C.E.\(^8\)

Ongoing wars with the Venetians, Genoese, Bulgarians, Arabs, Seljuks, and later Ottomans, as well as economic crises, gradually led to the collapse of the Eastern Roman Empire.\(^9\) In 1453 C.E., after laying siege to the city of Constantinople, Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II was victorious, officially taking the title of “Caesar of Rome.”\(^10\) The last Byzantine holdouts, the Despotate of Morea based in Mystras, the Empire of Trebizond, and the Principality of Theodoro would fall by 1475 C.E.\(^11\) While there are many enduring achievements of the Eastern Roman Empire, one notable legacy was the conversion of the Kievan Rus to the Greek Church which eventually became the Russian Orthodox Church with its own Patriarchate.\(^12\) After Constantinople fell, the Russian Tsars claimed its legacy, declaring Moscow as heir and “third Rome, second Jerusalem.” The Russian Tsars would thus continue the legacy of the Eastern Roman Empire up until the October (Bolshevik) Revolution of 1917.

**CONSTANTINE: THE MODEL EMPEROR-SAINT**

The ecclesiastical historian Eusebius of Caesarea (Pamphilus) writing the first Vita Constantini described the moments following the death of the emperor Constantine. Eusebius writes how the Praetorian guards assembled

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and lamented the deceased emperor, calling him “Master, Lord, and King.”  
He describes the public mourning for the emperor that swept through the whole city. Military personnel eventually took the body of the emperor, wrapped it in imperial purple, and placed it on a high pedestal in the imperial hall. There it remained, “guarded day and night” by people who kept watch and vigil over the emperor as if he were still alive.  
In fact, Eusebius says how the members of the ruling class and the military still saluted, genuflected, and paid homage to the emperor as if he were still alive.  
Eusebius concludes this section on the mourning and lying-in-state (65-67) of Constantine saying,  

Alone of mortals the Blessed One reigned even after death, and the customs were maintained just as if he were alive, God having granted this to him and no other since time began. Alone therefore among Emperors and unlike any other he had honoured by acts of every kind the all-sovereign God and his Christ, and it is right that he alone enjoyed these things, as the God over all allowed his mortal part to reign among mankind, thus demonstrating the ageless and deathless reign of his soul to those with minds not stony-hard.  

The death of Constantine, as described by Eusebius, depicts an emperor, beloved by his subjects, who receives a funeral worthy of a saint. Eusebius continues, saying that all the people “praised the Blessed One, the Godbeloved, the one who truly deserved the Empire.”  
The language here of “Blessed One” and “Godbeloved” already denotes a level of sanctity that would be the first of its kind for an emperor. That is in essence what is unique about the life of Constantine. As Sam Lieu notes, “Constantine was no ordinary emperor” and therefore posed challenges as well as opportunities for the historian Eusebius and later hagiographers.  

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18 Sam Lieu, “Constantine Byzantinus: The Anonymous *Life of Constantine (BHG 364)*,” in *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine Views- A Source History*, eds Samuel N. C. Lieu and Dominic Montserrat (New York: Routledge, 1996), 97. Lieu also notes that Eusebius had most likely conversed with Constantine but not in a capacity that would have given him access to exclusive information. In this sense, Lieu notes that Eusebius had to “resort to imperial propaganda” as his source for his life and history of Constantine. Source: *Ibid.* This is also noted by Timothy Barnes who disputes the idea that Eusebius was in any way close to the emperor or that he was a confident or counselor. Rather, Barnes states that “basic facts of geography and chronology contradict this conventional portrait.” Source: Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 266.
monumental event for a nascent Christendom but an axial moment in time for Christianity.

Constantine’s life has been the source of tremendous scholarship and hagiographical writing since he died in the fourth century. Constantine transformed Christianity, bringing it from the periphery of the empire and the margins of Roman life to the very center of imperial power. Many pivotal moments in his life have been recounted and retold countless times over the centuries, further cementing his importance as the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire. Yet, scholars continue to debate numerous aspects of his life, including his conversion to Christianity.

While Eusebius may have started the Vita Constantini while Constantine was still alive, it was still unfinished when Eusebius died.19 Eusebius’s Vita is described by Lieu as a merger between an epitaphios logos and history written in a hagiographical manner (quoted from Barnes).20 It is noted that the depiction of Constantine presented by Eusebius was considered “suspect by many Church leaders in the Greek East.”21 This was due in part to Constantine’s role in the Arian controversy as well as his role during the Diocletianic persecutions.22 Yet, even with these suspicions surrounding not only the V.C. but also Constantine himself, Gilbert Dragon notes how Constantine had already achieved sanctification by the fifth century.23 It was the process of writing and rewriting for hagiographers and historians that eventually in Dragon’s words “eliminate[d] the awkward episodes and render[ed] it [Constantine’s life] exemplary.”24 What was it about the life of Constantine that made him worthy of sanctification, commemoration, and veneration?

One of the most important and noteworthy episodes in Constantine’s early life would be the religious vision he received prior to his victory against Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. This episode is recounted first by Eusebius and by subsequent hagiographers who note the importance of this conversion, much like Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. This vision of the cross in the sky with the Latin letters “in this [sign] conquer” was accompanied by a visit by Christ who commanded the

19 Timothy D. Barnes, Constantine and Eusebius, 265.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Gilbert Dagron, Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 144.
24 Ibid.
emperor to use this sign as a military standard for all subsequent military engagements. Constantine told his goldsmiths to recreate the cross from his vision. Constantine’s army crushed and defeated Maxentius by the power of the cross that led his army into battle. This victory was a defining moment not only for Constantine who had with his victory solidified his rule, but for Christianity which was the real victor on the battlefield.

Figure 2: Head of the Colossus of Constantine, Capitoline Museums, Rome. Source: Wikimedia.

Given this victory, Constantine’s vision and “conversion” would be a critical marker for his sanctification. Additionally, Constantine convening the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea is important to church history as much as it is to his own sainthood. However, it is interesting to note here that

other major and noteworthy markers for sanctification were absent from the Vita of Eusebius. Barnes notes how Eusebius approached the task of writing about the life of Constantine “with a historian’s appreciation of its importance.” Moreover, it was Eusebius, a Christian himself, writing about the emperor Constantine who was worthy of commemoration. Barnes here writes that Eusebius presents a Constantine that is “a shining example of godly life for all.” However, Lieu notes how the V.C. does not speak of the founding of Constantinople or the discovery of the True Cross by Constantine’s mother, Helen. Both of these episodes would appear in later hagiographies of Constantine. This is because, according to Barnes, the V.C. “was not intended to be an entirely self-contained text.”

The transition from Constantine as emperor to Constantine as a saint happened in a short time span following his death. It is noteworthy here to discuss a few elements during Constantine’s life that paved the way for this. One was the concept of Constantine as a bishop, that is, as a “universal bishop” and “bishop over those outside [the church]” as outlined by Eusebius. This was followed by Constantine’s construction of an important church/mausoleum for the Holy Apostles that would also be the place where he would be buried. Dagron notes here that this church was “an attempt to reconcile an imperial cult and a Christian cult.” This would eventually develop into an idea that Constantine was isapostolos or “equal to the Apostles.” This idea, already being formulated while Constantine was still alive, shows what scholars have described as a possible process of “deification or equivalence with Christ by mimesis” which can be garnered from the V.C. Jonathan Bardill goes so far as to say that there is no doubt that “Eusebius suggested a parallel between Constantine and Christ.”

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26 Timothy D. Barnes, Constantine and Eusebius, 271.
27 Ibid.
28 James Skedros noted in a private correspondence that the Anonymous Life of Constantine sanitizes and sanctifies the V.C. of Eusebius, especially in regards to Constantine’s deathbed baptism. Skedros notes how this is “clearly a reworking of the story of Constantine to make him more Christian.” He then asked a two-part question. One, was this necessary? Two, would Constantine have attained his status as a saint without such reworkings? I would argue this wasn’t necessary since Constantine had already attained his status as a saint without such reworkings. Skedros agreed, adding that “Constantine’s original burial in the church (mausoleum) of the 12 apostles suggests the sanctity of the emperor at the moment of his death (or perhaps the apotheosis of the emperor in his understanding).”
29 Gilbert Dagron, Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium, 133.
30 Ibid., 139.
minted after Constantine’s death which highlight the development of a cult to preserve the memory and venerate Constantine.⁴²

By the fifth century, Constantine was already sanctified, and further developments and rewrites of his hagiography sanitized his life, leaving out the more scandalous or problematic historical facts.⁴³ Centuries later, the Synaxarion of Constantinople would have a version of Constantine’s life that would reference important events including the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, the Council of Nicaea, Helen’s finding of the True Cross, the founding of Constantinople, as well as the building of the mausoleum to the Holy Apostles.⁴⁴ For Dagron, Constantine became a saint so that he would not be a “model for Kingship.”⁴⁵ There can only ever be one emperor who changes the religion of an empire. Given the fact that Christianity now would enjoy a new status, Constantine by the mere fact that it was he who was the first emperor to accept it as his own and to allow it to flourish is understood as having a unique and therefore special status that no other emperor can ever have. This meant that Constantine “sanctified all his successors” who were hailed as “New Constantines.”⁴⁶ As Dagron notes, Constantine as the first Christian emperor “made not only a saint, but an experimental model of imperial sainthood; a model for all purposes, which has served as icon or target up to our day.”⁴⁷ Constantine’s importance can be summed up perfectly by Eusebius who writes,

He alone of all the Roman emperors has honoured God the All-sovereign with exceeding godly piety; he alone has publicly proclaimed to all the word of Christ; he alone has honoured his Church as no other since time began; he alone has destroyed all polytheistic error, and exposed every kind of idolatry; and surely he alone has deserved in life itself and after death such things as none could say has ever been achieved by any other among either Greeks or barbarians, or even among the ancient Romans, for his like has never been recorded from the beginning of time until our day.⁴⁸

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⁴² These coins include “venerable memory” (VN MR or IVST VENER MEMOR), “eternal devotion” (AETerna PIETAS), and “eternal Augustus” (SEMPER AVG). Source: *Ibid.*, 358.

⁴³ Here I can think of a few examples including Constantine’s baptism on his death bed and the allegation that he was baptized by an Arian bishop.

⁴⁴ Synaxarion of Constantinople – Notes from James Skedros “Emperors Listed in Synaxarion of CP (Delehaye edition).”

⁴⁵ Gilbert Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, 143.


The Byzantine Reception of Justinian

Emperor Constantine’s impact on the Eastern Roman Empire and Christianity at-large are without parallel in history. His numerous achievements were eventually incorporated into Synaxaria over the ensuing centuries. Yet, Constantine was not the last emperor but the first in a long line of emperors and empresses of the Eastern Roman Empire. If Constantine’s enduring legacy is the founding of Constantinople, then the city’s crown jewel, Hagia Sophia, belongs to the emperor Justinian. It was the under Emperor Justinian I that the Eastern Roman Empire reached the peak of its geographic power, reclaiming territory on the Italian and Iberian peninsulas as well as North Africa that had been lost in the previous century. Justinian’s achievements include convening the Fifth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople II) in 553 CE, establishing, organizing, and codifying legal codes and legislation in the Codex Justinianus, and for his massive building projects, most notably, Hagia Sophia. Yet, Justinian, while seen by many as righteous and pious, was not universally accepted as a saint like Constantine and Helen were. The reasons help uncover some of the nuances inherent to imperial sainthood.

In order to understand the differences between emperors Constantine and Justinian, there is no better place to start than the tenth-century mosaic located over the southwestern entrance of Hagia Sophia (Figure 3). Here we see the emperor Justinian on the left presenting the church of Hagia Sophia to the enthroned Theotokos and Christ child in the panakranta style. On the right, is the emperor Constantine presenting the city of Constantinople. The inscription to the left of Justinian is ΙΟΥΣΤΙΝΙΑΝΟΣ Ο ΑΙΩΝΙΟΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΟΝ (Justinian, the Emperor of illustrious memory) and the inscription on the right of Constantine is ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΣ Ο ΕΝ ΑΓΙΟΙΣ ΜΕΓΑΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ (Constantine, the great Emperor amongst

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40 Frank R. Trombley and Shaun Tougher write as “Byzantium was the continuation of the Roman empire, the military role of the emperor was strongly enshrined in its political and cultural traditions.” Thus, Justinian I (527-565) while not a general as the authors note, still was actively involved in military affairs and “managing the conduct of war.” Frank R. Trombley and Shaun Tougher, “The Emperor at War: Duties and Ideals,” in The Emperor in the Byzantine World: Papers from the Forty-Seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, ed. Shaun Tougher (New York: Routledge, 2019), 179-180.
the Saints).\textsuperscript{41} The mosaic prominently shows both emperors with halos and, as Kateryna Kovalchuk notes, Justinian is “on the right hand of the Theotokos enthroned with a Child, giving him, and not Constantine the Great, the place of honor.”\textsuperscript{42} Yet, even with this magnificent mosaic, Justinian was still not considered a saint at this time nor would he be considered more universally as a saint until long after the Byzantine Empire had disappeared. In fact, according to Kovalchuk, the only hagiographical narrative for Justinian, the Vita Justiniani, was “proven to be a late and spurious composition, dated to the seventeenth century.”\textsuperscript{43} So why was Justinian for all his accomplishments and building projects not universally considered a saint?

![Mosaic of Justinian and Theotokos](image)

Figure 3: Vestibule mosaic in the typanum over the southwestern entrance of Hagia Sophia. Source: Wikimedia.

In order to understand the spiritual status of Justinian, it is critical to understand the pressing issues of the day. For one, as Kovalchuk notes, Justinian was an emperor that was not easily “canonized” when looking at

\textsuperscript{41} Kateryna Kovalchuk, “The Founder as a Saint: The Image of Justinian I in the Great Church of St Sophia,” Byzantium: Revue Internationale Des Études Byzantines Vol. 77 (2007), 206. It should be noted that the use of the halo in this mosaic for the two emperors is typical for depicting emperors even if they are not saints. “However, one wonders if a 10th c. viewer of the mosaic would have made this distinction,” asked James Skedros in a private correspondence. He goes on to ask, “to that viewer, are both emperors saints? Is the viewer conscious about the absence of ἅγιος for Justinian? Does the adjective ἅγιος get used for other saints; how common is it?” These are questions for future research.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 209.
the evidence from Byzantine historians and chronographers.\textsuperscript{44} Questions remained regarding Justinian’s faith and his alleged beliefs that ran counter to dogma of the Church. Allegations were made that Justinian believed in the “incorruptibility of Christ’s body from the moment of his conception.”\textsuperscript{45} This would ultimately mean that anyone holding this position denies the fullness of Christ’s humanity. Byzantine Church historian Evagrius Scholasticus writes,

Justinian, after abandoning the correct highway of doctrine and travelling a path untrodden by the Apostles and Fathers, fell among thistles and thorns. Although he wished to fill the Church too with these, he failed in his objective since the Lord protected the royal road with unbroken fences, lest murderers might leap onto a leaning wall, as it were, or an overturned barrier, in fulfilment of the prediction of the prophet.\textsuperscript{46} [Book IV, Chapter 39]

Thus, according to Evagrius, Justinian’s quest for unity in the Church led him to embrace a theological position that was known as aphthartodocetism. Evagrius goes so far as to say that Justinian “after filling absolutely everywhere with confusion and turmoil and collecting the wages for this at the conclusion of his life, passed over to the lowest places of punishment.”\textsuperscript{47}

Numerous Byzantine historians condemned Justinian for deviating from the orthodox dogma of the Church. These historians included Eustratius, Theophanes, Symeon Logothetes, George Cedrenus, Zonaras, Michal Glycas, and Constantine Manasses.\textsuperscript{48} Procopius wrote scathingly about Justinian in his Secret Histories. In fact, there are numerous passages where Procopius refers to Justinian as a “demon [who] held human form.”\textsuperscript{49} Procopius even says that Theodora, Justinian’s wife, was also demonic as well. He writes, “these two [Justinian and Theodora] never seemed to be human beings at all but rather murderous demons of some kind...”\textsuperscript{50} Procopius goes on to say that these demons “put on a human form, thereby

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 212.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{46} Michael Whitby, Trans., \textit{The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus} (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 250.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 254.

\textsuperscript{48} Kateryna Kovalchuk, “The Founder as a Saint: The Image of Justinian I in the Great Church of St Sophia,” 214.


\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 58.
becoming man-demons, and in this way demolished the entire world.” Kovalchuk notes that these accusations and attacks by Procopius “do not appear to be widespread” and were not well known until “later centuries.”

Over time however, successive commentators lost interest in the faults and errors of Justinian, focusing instead on his achievements, specifically his expansion of the empire, his development of the law, and the important religious building projects he undertook. The fourteenth-century patriarch Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos wrote in his Ecclesiastical Histories of the importance of not banishing Justinian from the Church simply for believing a heretical dogma towards the end of his life and reign. Through research and discovery of lost texts, Nikephoros as Kovalchuk notes, eventually comes to see that Justinian should be considered an “upright and faithful emperor” even though uncertainty and controversy still surrounded Justinian. Nikephoros references the Acts of the Sixth Ecumenical Council that, he claims, support the idea that Justinian was already seen as a saint. Kovalchuk disagrees, noting that there is only one reference to Justinian as “one of the saints” whereas the rest speak of him as a “pious” and “blessed” emperor.

The Synaxarion of Constantinople has both Justinian and Theodora who are commemorated on 14 November. A later version of the Synaxarion from the thirteenth century known as the Paris manuscript BN 1621 and identified as Q expands the section on Justinian. In this version, Justinian is identified as an “orthodox emperor” whose achievements include the Council of Constantinople and the building of innumerable churches in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. In fact, Kovalchuk notes how “building a church in Byzantium was both a religious and political act that established a pious and faithful reputation of a builder in the public’s eye.” With this understanding, Kovalchuk concludes that it was Justinian’s building activities that ultimately led to his sainthood. Dagron notes that that at two of these churches, Hagia Sophia and Ephesos, large crowds would gather to worship and commemorate Justinian but that these never became cults as

51 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 216.
54 Ibid., 218.
55 Ibid., 219.
56 Ibid, 236.
57 Ibid.
they had with other saints.58 Decisively it was the construction of Hagia Sophia that sealed Justinian’s special status amongst the Church, eventually becoming a recognized saint long after the empire he once ruled over had collapsed.

Figure 4: Mosaic depicting Justinian I, Bishop Maximianus of Ravenna, Clergy, Officials, and Soldiers. Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. Source: Wikimedia

CONCLUSION: SAINTLY EMPERORS AND EMPRESSES

The previous two sections juxtaposed the lives and eventual sanctification of Constantine and Justinian. However, there were many more emperors and empresses that ruled over the Eastern Roman Empire over its 1100+ years.59 This begs the question of how many of those who ruled became saints? What was the criteria for sainthood? While these are questions that could comprise their own monograph, it is safe to say that at a minimum, sanctification has a political dimension to it. Once more we return to the question of not only “when” but “how” an emperor or empress was canonized? When does someone sit down and write a vita of an emperor and why?

58 Gilbert Dagron, Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium, 150.
59 The Serbians canonized most of their rulers begging the question about the politicization of sainthood and its links to identity, an “ethnos,” and eventually in the 19th century, to nationalism.
First, it is important to recognize that by the time of the Synaxarion of Constantinople there were numerous emperors and empresses listed.\textsuperscript{60} Dagron notes their nebulous nature, bringing Delehaye in to ask whether these entries for emperors and empresses were “liturgical, funerary, or a mixture.”\textsuperscript{61} While Constantine, Helen, and Theophano according to Dagron are specifically connected to the Greek adjective hagios/hagia (saint), there are many others who do not have this term associated with them directly but employ other terms like eusevis, hosios, and others.

There are a few certainties though. All the rulers who convened Ecumenical Councils are commemorated. These include Constantine the Great, Theodosius I, Theodosius II, Marcian, Justinian, Constantine IV, Justinian II, and Irene.\textsuperscript{62} Yet, looking at this list, one can be perplexed how someone as brutal as Justinian II or vicious as Irene can be commemorated? It goes without saying that as the aforementioned sections made reference to, the passage of time has an ability to privilege a selective reading of a life or a particular moment in history. Thus, for many of the emperors/empresses, there is an emphasis placed on their achievements in an effort to solidify support for the empire, stability, and continuity of governance.

Empresses feature prominently as holy and devout rulers, becoming saints as well.\textsuperscript{63} Nathalie Deliernieux notes how their lives were also “highly politicised” and their depictions differ from other hagiographical accounts.\textsuperscript{64} Examples of holy women rulers include Pulcheria whose life was seen as devout and whose achievements include building projects as well as “caus[ing] the holy synod to take place at Chalcedon.”\textsuperscript{65} In stark contrast to the devout and pious Pulcheria, the Empire Irene had her own son, Constantine VI, maimed and blinded to secure her power on the throne. He died shortly thereafter. Even with this history, she is commemorated as a

\textsuperscript{60} It is important to note here that earlier and well as later synaxaria continued to mention various emperors and empresses. Synaxaria tend to be local and can be very helpful for studying how Byzantine Christians understood the varying degrees of sanctity of the various emperors and empresses.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.}, 153.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid.}


\textsuperscript{65} Kenneth G. Holm, \textit{Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 226-227.
saint especially for her role in restoring icons and as a result of her exile.\textsuperscript{66} Contrasted with the iconophile Irene, Theophilos who was an iconoclast whose life would eventually transform into something more palatable and even depicting him “as if he were an iconodule.”\textsuperscript{67}

In the later centuries of the Byzantine Empire, more and more emperors were sanctified by the empire and the church. Alice-Mary Talbot notes how this period of Byzantine history “witnessed an efflorescence in the writing of saints’ lives.”\textsuperscript{68} The Emperor John III Vatatzes was commemorated shortly after his death. Paul Magdalino notes the irony of his canonization saying, “Vatatzes, who of all emperors presented himself least as a New Constantine, was the first emperor since Constantine the Great to be recognized as a saint.”\textsuperscript{69} John III Vatatzes was well known for his generosity and philanthropy.\textsuperscript{70} When the fortunes of the empire changed, he was said to appear to provide support and protection. Thus, John III Vatatzes became “a protector and substitute emperor.”\textsuperscript{71} The last Byzantine Emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos, who recently was canonized, was even seen by some as a figure who had gone into occultation, only to return when Constantinople would be conquered once again.\textsuperscript{72}

This article has attempted to present and understand imperial sanctity by comparing and contrasting the lives of Constantine and Justinian. The evidence exists to acknowledge the fact that sainthood was, at least in


\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, 70.

\textsuperscript{72} Donald M. Nicol, \textit{The Immortal Emperor: The Life and Legend of Constantine Palaiologos, last Emperor of the Romans} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 97-106.
part, political. The Byzantine world did not have a conception of politics inseparable from religion. It would be anachronistic of us to place the post-Enlightenment ideas of secularism and separation of church and state on to the Byzantine empire. Concepts like Caesaropapism should be problematized since they posit that there could have been an alternative. Byzantine rulers were born into a sanctified empire where they were part of a divinely ordained order that they safeguarded and preserved for over a millennium.