

The imperial panels at San Vitale: a reconsideration

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The imperial panels at San Vitale, Ravenna play a prominent role in Byzantine art history. These mosaics have engendered a lengthy bibliography, much of it dedicated to interpreting the possible connotations of these works.¹ There has been debate over the nature of the ceremonial depicted, over the relationship of these panels to the rest of the programme of decoration within the church and over the representation of imperial power.² This paper will argue that a consideration of gender, as represented in these panels, can add to our understanding of these important works of art and the social climate which produced them.

At first glance the mosaics of Justinian and Theodora in San Vitale appear to present the viewer with a balanced pair of im-

1. The bibliography on S. Vitale is extensive, so I have restricted this to more important recent works:

G. Rodenwalt, 'Bemerkungen zu den Kaisermosaiken in San Vitale', *JdI* LIX-LX (1944-45), 88-110

O. von Simson, *Sacred Fortress. Byzantine art and statecraft in Ravenna* (Chicago 1948)

F.W. Deichmann, *Ravenna Hauptstadt des Spätantiken Abendlandes* vols I (1969), II, 2 (1976) and III (1958 Wiesbaden)

G. Stricevic, 'Iconografia dei mosaici imperiali a San Vitale', *Felix Ravenna* 80 (1959) 5-27

A. Grabar, 'Quel est le sens de l'offrande de Justinien et de Theodora sur les mosaïques de Saint-Vital?' *Felix Ravenna* 81 (1960) 63-77

G. Stricevic, 'Sure le probleme de l'iconographie des mosaïques imperiales de Saint-Vital', *Felix Ravenna* 85 (1962) 80-100

S. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1981) (hereafter *Art*).

2. On the nature of the ceremonial represented here see the debate between Stricevic and Grabar (note 1) and T.F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (Univ. Park, 1971) 146-7. On the place of the panels within the programme of decoration in San Vitale see von Simpson, *op. cit.* 23-39 and S. MacCormack, *Art*, 260-64. On imperial portraiture see von Simson, *op. cit.* 27-29 and Deichmann, *op. cit.* II, 2, 187.

perial portraits (plates one and two).³ In San Vitale the Emperor and Empress stand opposite to one another, their gazes fixed on each other across the apse. Both are haloed, crowned and clothed in imperial purple. Each is accompanied by courtiers. But, as will be shown below, this apparent equivalence is undermined by a number of pictorial devices.

The manufacture of these images in San Vitale can be dated to about 547.⁴ They are situated next to the apse windows, immediately beneath the conch of the apse. The Justinian panel is to the left, the Theodora panel to the right. They are part of a wider programme of decoration in the presbytery area. This has some influence on the particular forms of representation present in these panels. The use of liturgical references in the imagery — the chalice and paten for example — establishes these panels as a part of the wider programme. Nevertheless, the issue of gender that is being raised here lies strictly between these two panels. As a result they will be treated in isolation from the remainder of the programme.⁵

Justinian is at the centre of his panel. To the right of him is Archbishop Maximian of Ravenna with two priests. The Archbishop is the only figure in these two panels to be identified by an inscription. Behind and to the immediate left of the Emperor are courtiers and at the extreme left of the panel there is a group of soldiers. The priests carry an incenser, a gospel and a cross. The Emperor carries a paten. The particular combination of elements carried by the priests indicates that reference is being made to the Little Entrance at the start of the Liturgy when these items were brought into the church.⁶ The figures stand in a space

3. von Simson, *op. cit.* 27-29 and Deichmann, *op. cit.* II, 2, 187.

4. The church was dedicated in 547 (Deichmann, *op. cit.* II, 2, 48) and Theodora died in June 548 (*The Chronicle of John Malalas*, tr. E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys and R. Scott [Melbourne 1986] 289, Book 18.104). Assuming that this is a portrait of the living Theodora (see below), the images should be dated to about 547.

5. Such an approach is not intended to deny that these images are a part of the wider programme of this decoration. However, the issue of gender through which I am analysing these portraits lies primarily between these two panels.

6. T.F. Mathews, *op. cit.* 147.

enclosed by framing columns. This suggests an interior space, but the use of gold tesserae makes the setting ambivalent.

The Theodora panel shares some of the features of the Justinian panel. Both panels are framed by columns. The imperial figure is central and stands surrounded by courtiers. Theodora holds a chalice, indicating that she is a participant in the same Liturgy as Justinian. Further to this liturgical connection she is united to Justinian through the use of a halo, the strong purple cloak and the crown; the attributes of an imperial figure. The Empress is attended by two male and seven female courtiers. The spatial arrangement in Theodora's panel is more complex than Justinian's. To the left is a darkened curtained doorway, at the centre a niche, in the foreground a fountain, and to the right a hanging cloth across the upper right hand corner of the panel. This space can be identified as an atrium of a church. The fountain suggests this identification. The implication is that Theodora and her court are about to enter the church through the darkened doorway.

A literal reading of these panels suggests they are depicting an enactment of the Liturgy.⁷ The elements of the court, the Church and the paraphernalia of ritual support this view. The lack of a clear definition of the space in Justinian's panel has led to the conclusion that the Emperor and his entourage have already entered the church. The curtained doorway and the fountain in Theodora's panel can be understood as the representation of the atrium of the church.⁸ The implication is that Theodora and her entourage are following the Emperor into the church. Yet the division of the ceremonial procession across the two panels acts to undermine (without denying) this narrative interpretation of these mosaics. As a representation of a ceremony it disturbs the sense of cohesion enacted in ceremonial by dividing the participants into two distinct groups,⁹ but as a representation of the

7. *ibid.*, 146-47; Deichmann, *op. cit.* II, 2, 180.

8. *ibid.*

9. S. MacCormack, *Art*, 239-66; *eadem*, 'Christ, the Emperor, Time and Ceremonial', *B* 52 (1982) 287-309.

Emperor and Empress it allows for the distinct portrayal of their separate roles.

The analysis of these panels will begin with the specific portraits of the Emperor and Empress. In particular, two aspects in the representation of the Empress serve to distinguish her portrayal from that of Justinian. Theodora, unlike Justinian, is depicted as being tall, even taller than her male companions. This is in conflict with textual evidence which describes her as being short.¹⁰ Some reason is required to account for this disparity between the visual and the verbal evidence. The Empress is situated beneath a scalloped niche, whereas Justinian has no such backdrop. Arguments given to account for this use of the niche include the following. The use of a niche in this period has been identified as a standard type for the representation of an imperial figure. The comparisons frequently cited are the 'Ariadne' ivories of c500.¹¹ A more recent reading of these mosaics has argued that this use of the niche is designed to show that Theodora was dead by the time that these mosaics were set. As such the open darkened door can be read as her means of transit to the other world.¹² Against the first of these arguments is the fact that the designers of the mosaic saw no need to set Justinian within a niche in order to define him as an Emperor; why then was it felt necessary to place Theodora within the niche? The problem with the second argument is that it ignores the chalice that Theodora carries and so undermines the clear references within the work to the liturgical ceremony in which Theodora is participating.¹³

10. Procopius, *Secret History*, Loeb ed. H.B. Dewing, X.11.

11. Deichmann, *op. cit.* II, 2, 182. For the ivories see: W.F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters* (Mainz 1976) Taf. 26, pl. 51, 52.

12. S. MacCormack, *Art*, 263.

13. MacCormack's argument provides the most fundamental reassessment of this imagery (*Art*, 260-264). She raises a number of points highlighting the differences in the representation of the Emperor and the Empress. The principle cause for these differences is, MacCormack argues, that this is the representation of a dead Empress. The niche, the fountain and the doorway of Theodora's panel are interpreted as elements in the representation of the dead Empress (see my alternative reading of these below). The representation of a dead Empress and a living Emperor is possible. Paul the Silentiary describes such an image in his *ekphrasis* of the rebuilt St. Sophia (C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire* [Toronto 1986] 89). From Paul's description of the equivalence of these portrayals it is apparent that the artist in St.

The visual devices of Theodora's height and of her niche are just two of several means by which the designer of these mosaics has chosen to distinguish the Emperor from the Empress. These visual signs will be analysed in greater detail below. The question remains as to why these differences are introduced into these images. This paper will argue that these differences find their basis in the sixth-century perception of the gender of the Emperor and Empress.

Any analysis of these panels in terms of gender requires a knowledge of the attitudes regarding gender held by the sixth-century viewer. For instance, what are the attitudes to gender available to the sixth-century viewer? Do these attitudes apply to imperial figures, or do holders of this rank transcend conceptions of gender?

The framework of Byzantine sexual attitudes lies in the Biblical discourse. The assumptions established in the Biblical texts dominate the patristic literature on women and this in turn prevails within Byzantine society. This can be demonstrated if a statement on gender by John Chrysostom is examined. In his *Discourse II on Genesis 2* Chrysostom wrote: 'Then why is the man said to be in the "image of God" and the woman is not? Because what Paul says about the "image" does not pertain to form. The "image" has rather to do with authority, and this only the man has; the woman has it no longer'.¹⁴ Behind this statement lies the Fall (Genesis 3, 16) and its description of woman as the inferior of the man: 'your (Eve's) desire shall be to your husband,

Sophia found it unnecessary to introduce the props identified in the Theodora panel by MacCormack to represent Theodora as a dead person. MacCormack suggests that Theodora's post-mortem role in the San Vitale scheme is to act as a foil for the Emperor. A parallel is drawn with Corpius' *In laudem Iustini minoris* (ed. A. Cameron [London 1976]) in which the Empress Sophia, as an embodiment of wisdom, is understood as a foil to the Emperor Justin II, who embodies justice. This wordplay is not limited to the Emperor and Empress. It also includes the Emperor's mother Vigilantia (Preface, lines 20-24). The problem is whether this verbal model should be applied to the visual text of the San Vitale panels. MacCormack's assumption that this model can be applied rests on the identification of the Theodora panel as a portrayal of the dead Empress. I will argue below that the evidence used by MacCormack to present this as a dead Theodora can be interpreted in a wholly different manner.

14. *Discourse 2 on Genesis 2* (PG 54) col. 589.

and he shall rule over you'. In this verse Eve, and therefore woman, is placed below man as a result of her role in the Fall. This position of male authority is further enhanced in Chrysostom's eyes, through reference to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In this Paul writes of the relative positions of man and woman thus: 'For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man . . . that is why a woman ought to have a veil on her head', and: 'But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband'.¹⁵ Paul and his followers are seeking to show that even prior to the Fall woman is to be seen as the inferior of man, being an image of the image of God. Together these elements amounted to a misogyny which, grounded in Eve, condemned all women: 'and you know that you are also Eve, God's judgement on this sex lives on in our age; the guilt necessarily lives on as well. You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of the tree . . . because of your punishment, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die'.¹⁶ Such misogyny was to remain a persistent feature of Byzantium.¹⁷

The condemnation of women within the Biblical texts was matched by the separate discourse of an asexual ideal found within the same texts. In theory this ideal offered a way out of the misogynist perception of the sexual divide. The basis of this lay in Genesis 1, 27: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them'. Similarly, Paul writes: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ'.¹⁸ Both these passages suggest that in a state of grace the sexual divide ceases to exist. This theory of essential unity is developed into a theory of salvation in the patristic literature. Notable for this is the *Gospel of Thomas*: 'When you make the two one, and make the inside like the outside, and the outside like the inside,

15. *Corinthians I*, 11, 7.

16. Tertullian, *On the dress of women I*, 1, 2 (CSEL 70.59).

17. C. Galatariotou, 'Holy women and witches: aspects of Byzantine conceptions of gender', *BMGS* 9 (1984/5) 55-94, 55.

18. *Galatians* 3, 24.

and the upperside like the underside and (in such a way) that you make the man (with) the woman a single one, in order that the man is not the man and the woman is not the woman . . . then you will go into (the kingdom)'.¹⁹ This is echoed in Jerome's *Against Jovinian* of 393: 'Virgins begin to be on earth what others will be afterwards in heaven. If it is promised us that we shall be as the angels (among angels, however, there is no difference of sex), either we shall be without sex, as the angels are, or assuredly, as it is plainly attested, we may be resurrected in our own sex but shall not perform the sexual function'.²⁰ Here, the asexual state (virginity) is likened to the state of angels or alternatively de-sexualised beings. The absence of sexual distinction is understood as a correlate of a state of grace.

Therefore, in terms of the Biblical sources and in terms of their patristic followers, it can be seen that attitudes to women were essentially twofold. One view was that women were equivalent to Eve, the other view being that within a state of glory the sexual distinction was dissolved. These two discourses provoked separate reactions.

The misogynist discourse manifested itself in the attitudes towards women within society. Woman within Byzantine society was heir to a long tradition of relative seclusion.²¹ Chrysostom provides a statement of this position: 'Our life is customarily organised into two spheres: public affairs and private matters, both of which were determined by God. To woman is assigned the presidency of the household; to man all the business of state, the market place, the administration of justice, government, the military and all other social enterprises',²² and thus: 'a wife has just one purpose: to guard the possessions we have accumulated to keep a close watch on the income, to take charge of the household'. In this way Chrysostom outlines a clear demarcation of social roles between male and female. While this strong

19. Grant, *The secret sayings of Jesus* (London 1960) 75 (hereafter *Secret*).

20. *PL* 23.273A.

21. J. Herrin, 'In search of Byzantine woman: three avenues of approach', in *Images of women in antiquity*, ed. Cameron/Kuhr (London 1983) 167-89, 169 (hereafter *Three Avenues*).

22. *The kind of women who ought to be taken as wives*, 4 (PG 51) 230.

dichotomy was undermined by the evidence of practice (see below), it nevertheless provided a repeated framework for Byzantine thinking on the sexes.

The assumed error of crossing the convention of sexual division is best illustrated in Procopios' portrayal of Theodora in the *Secret History*, where the Empress is condemned for bringing supposedly feminine traits into the realm of state affairs.²³ In section 15 of the *Secret History* Procopios outlined the Empress' love of indulgence only to complain: 'And though she had strayed thus into every path of self-indulgence for so great a part of the day, she thought fit to run the whole of the Roman Empire'.²⁴ Similarly, Procopios attributed the murder of Amalsuntha, daughter of the Gothic king Theodoric, to the jealousy felt by Theodora towards her.²⁵ In the *Wars* the same writer puts an expression of the attitude towards women in public life into the Empress' mouth: 'As to the belief that a woman ought not to be daring among men or to assert herself boldly among those who are holding back from fear, I consider that the present crisis does not permit us to discuss whether the matter should be regarded in this or in some other way'.²⁶ Only in the confusion of crisis can the Empress feel able to speak out in public. Procopios clearly treats Theodora within the categories that his society assigns to women.

In a similar vein Amalasantha and the Empress Irene, who actually ruled the Empire as a woman alone for five years, are, when spoken of in an approving fashion, described in male language with male attributes.²⁷ This suggests that the office of the

23. Averil Cameron, *Procopius* (London 1986) 67-83 esp. 69.

E.A. Fisher, 'Theodora and Antonia in the *Historia Arcana*: history and/or fiction?' *Arethusa* 11 (1978) 253-80, provides an assessment of Procopios' attitudes to women throughout his literature. Fisher argues that the Empress is a special figure (259), but like Cameron the Empress is understood as a special *woman*.

24. Translation from the Penguin edition of the *Secret History*, tr. G. Williamson, 114. (Loeb ed. XV.9).

25. Loeb ed. XVI.1-5.

26. *Wars* I:XXIV.33, Loeb ed. H.B. Dewing (London 1971).

27. P. Speck, *Kaiser Konstantin VI* (Munich 1978) referring to a letter of Theodore the Studite, Letter 1, 7 (933A).

In the *Secret History* Amalasantha is described as acting in an 'exceptionally virile manner' (Loeb ed. XVI.1).

Emperor or of a ruler was considered a male office. Any female occupant of that office could as a result only be defined in male terms. A comparison might be drawn with our contemporary discussion over how to address the chairman/chairperson/chairwoman/chair. Underlying this discussion is the recognition that there is a sexual bias in language. Such bias was also present in Byzantium. This can be seen in this use of male language to define the female occupant of a traditionally and linguistically male position.²⁸

The hierarchising of society in terms of gender, identified in the texts of men such as Chrysostom, was also structured into the legal position of women.²⁹ In the codification of the law produced under Justinian the division into public and private spheres and the authority of men over women were instituted. The law specifically denies women the right to have a role in local and central government, to perform civic duties, to act as a judge or to be a banker.³⁰ Further to this they could only partake in judicial proceedings if the case directly affected them. When involved in a case a second could stand in their stead or a part of the proceedings would take place in the woman's home. A woman could not be held in protective custody. Only in rare instances could a woman be condemned for ignorance of the law.³¹ Finally, in terms of the public situation of women, there was no place for a figure such as an Empress within the Byzantine law.³² This restriction from the public domain did not allow women greater power within the home. Within the home she was subject to her father before marriage and to her husband thereafter. Nor were husband and wife treated as equals, as the laws on adultery will suggest. A man could only be guilty of adultery if he committed it with a married woman, a woman was guilty regardless of her partner. An adulterous woman, unlike a man, was unable to re-

28. This is thoroughly investigated in Dale Spender, *Man-made language* (London 1985) in which the author analyses the gender bias in language and its implications.

29. J. Beaucamp, 'La situation juridique de la femme à Byzance', *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 20 (1977) 145-176, 149.

30. *Digest* L, 17; XIII, 5; *Codex* X, 42, 9.

31. *Digest* III, 1, 1; III, 3, 54; *Codex* II, 12, 4; II, 12, 18; *Digest* XIII, 5.

32. Beaucamp, *art. cit.* 149.

marry. The inequality of marriage is again demonstrated in the way in which a woman marrying a social superior was elevated in her standing, whereas a woman marrying an inferior lost her status. Theoretically a woman was free once she became a widow.³³ There are many examples of the free ranging and powerful widow in this period and yet the husband remained a dominant feature in the widow's life.³⁴

In assessing the actual situation of women within this early Byzantine society there is the problem of a lack of evidence.³⁵ One aspect of this is that for the most part evidence only refers to exceptional women, elite figures such as Empresses, aristocratic figures and saints. Yet from the discourse underlying this data general conclusions about the place of women in Byzantium can be drawn from which an understanding of Byzantine women might be derived. Discussion within texts of specific women indicates that exceptions to the secluded image of women were not infrequent. The number of powerful Empresses produced by this society seems to belie the misogynist image that Byzantium has. At a perhaps more 'ordinary' level, there is much evidence of women controlling property. This situation should not be altogether surprising given the Chrysostom definition above. This control of property falls into two parts. First, women handed down property specifically through the female line.³⁶ Secondly, there is evidence that women as widows held control over family property. In 897 the Tzagastes family sold land to the monastery of St. Andrew at Peristera, the designated head of the family being the widow Georgia.³⁷ The evidence of extensive travel by women, best exemplified by the widow Aetheria and the circle of Roman women around St. Jerome, seems to deny the image

33. Nov 117c 8.9. F. Gorla, *Studi sul matrimonio dell' adultera nel diritto giustiniano e bizantino* (Turin 1975) 182-85, 228-51.

34. The inscription on the Turtura fresco is written by the son of the widow Turtura and treats her in terms of her husband, Obas, who had been dead for thirty-five years. For the text see Bagatti, *Il Cimitero di Commodilla* (Vatican City 1936).

35. Evidenced by the writers in 'Women and Monasticism' *BF* 11 (1985).

36. Herrin, *Three Avenues*, 174-79.

37. Herrin, *Three Avenues*, 177.

of women trapped in seclusion.³⁸ It is notable that women could also be well educated; St. Eugenia is reported to have amazed philosophers with her knowledge of Greek and Latin texts and her wisdom.³⁹ Byzantine woman was therefore apparently able to achieve a measure of autonomy.

Yet the apparent autonomy of Byzantine women was to an extent illusory. The representation of female Empresses, the women with perhaps the greatest claims to autonomy within this society, compromises their womanhood. Surviving texts maintained the discourse that allotted to men the 'public' role in this society. Irene was praised for being manly and Procopios depicted Theodora as a woman intruding into the public affairs of men. The female Empress had no place in Byzantine law. At a different level of perception evidence regarding marriage reveals a strong patriarchal control. The case of St. Euphrosyne of Alexandria demonstrates the situation and suggests one means of escape:

Euphrosyne: 'I could have wished that I were able to go out from this vain world, but I fear that my father wishes to give me husbands because of the vain wealth of this world'.

Holy man: 'Nay, my daughter, let not a man dishonour thy body, and do not surrender such beauty to shameful passion, but be thou altogether in thy purity a bride to Christ, who is able to give thee instead of these transitory things the kingdom of heaven. Therefore shave thy head in secret and go to the monastery and thou shalt be saved'.⁴⁰

Euphrosyne is seeking to escape from marriage. For her the marriage is organised by her father and is oriented around 'the vain wealth of this world'. By way of a response to this analysis of the woman's place within society, the Holy man offers the asexual community of the monastery as the only means of escape. The model of autonomy ('be thou altogether in thy purity') apparently lies outside of society.

38. J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's travels* (London 1971) 20-23.

39. Smith-Lewis, *Select narratives of the holy women from the Syro-Antiochene or Sinai palimpsest*, *Studia Sinaitica* IX & X (London 1900) 2.

40. *ibid.*, 49.

The promise of the Church as the means of escape from society was offered to widows.⁴¹ Widows were often young. As a result, they suffered from a social and in some cases a practical need to re-marry. At one end of the scale there is the tale of Maria told by John Moschos.⁴² Having been widowed she seeks to marry a soldier, but he will not marry her as she has children. Maria's solution is to kill her children. It is a moral tale and so the soldier rejects Maria, but it serves to illustrate the potentially desperate situation of the widow. At the other end of the scale are those women able to resist second marriages. One of these, Marcella, is praised by St. Jerome in his epistle 127: 'When her mother Albina grasped at the chance to have an eminent guardian for the widow beyond the family circle, Marcella replied, "If I wished to marry rather than to dedicate myself to perpetual chastity, I would seek a husband, not an inheritance"'.⁴³ The Church was identified as the means of escape from the limitations of the roles that women could perform within Byzantine society. Within the Church the asexual ideal, embodied in ascetic practice, offered to women (and implicitly men) the opportunity to transcend the sexual divide realised at the Fall. For Euphrosyne and Marcella chastity opened the way to salvation and escape from the world. Unfortunately this promise was not kept.⁴⁴

Asceticism was the path taken in the pursuit of the asexual ideal.⁴⁵ In theory it was a literal withdrawal from the world. This rejection of the material was intended to bring the practitioner into a greater proximity to God. Gregory of Nyssa's *De Virginitate* praises the ascetic ideal as part of the process of salvation, in effect a return to the asexual state of pre-Fall Paradise.⁴⁶ The

41. Herrin, *Three Avenues*, 179; *eadem*, 'Women and the Church in Byzantium', *Bulletin of the British Association of Orientalists* (1979).

42. Herrin, *Three Avenues*, 173.

43. E. Clark, *Women in the early church* (Delaware 1983) *CSEL* 56, 146.

44. On the relationship between theory and practice in Byzantine attitudes to women see: A. Laiou, 'The role of women in Byzantine society', *JÖB* 31, 1.1 (1981) 28-60, and L. Garland, 'The Life and ideology of Byzantine women', *B* 58 (1988) 361-93.

45. Bugge, *Virginitas* (The Hague 1975) 30.

46. D. Blank, 'The etymology of salvation in Gregory of Nyssa's "De Virginitate"', *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986).

image of asceticism is tied to the angel because of its supposedly asexual nature. 'He who has chosen the angelic life has raised himself to an incorporeal manner of living, since he has surpassed the ordinary possibilities of human nature. For it belongs to the nature of the angels to be freed from the society of marriage and not let themselves be turned aside to the contemplation of any other beauty than that of the divine face'.⁴⁷ With this asexual theme running through asceticism it seems that a theoretically alternative and autonomous society was opened for women.

The reception of women within the Church, however, does not appear to have freed them of many of the constraints inherent within society. In particular the Church appears to have reinforced the sexual divide through its asexual policy. The most radical expression of this is to be found in the transvestite saints.⁴⁸ The reasoning behind transvestism can be found in the *Gospel of Thomas*: 'Simon Peter said to them, "Let Maricham go away from us. For women are not worthy of life". Jesus said, "Lo, I will draw her so that I will make her a man so that she too may become a living spirit which is like you men; for every woman who makes herself a man will enter into the kingdom of heaven"'.⁴⁹ This view is echoed in one of the lives of the transvestite saints, that of Eugenia: 'For by nature I am a woman. And I was not able to fulfil the desire of my soul regarding the fear of God, unless I changed myself into this chaste and honourable and excellent guise. And being a woman by nature, in order that I might gain everlasting life I became a man for a short time'.⁵⁰ These texts indicate that transvestism was a physical manifestation of the asexual ideal through the uniting of female flesh with male garb. But underlying this theory there is a re-assertion of male supremacy. The ascetic practice followed by these saints served to destroy the physical woman; fasting would stop the menstrual flow and wither the breasts. There is no evidence of male transvestism, a fact which implies that asex-

47. Basil of Caesarea *Sermo asceticus* II (*PG* 31) 873, tr. from Bugge, *op. cit.*, 32.

48. E. Patlagean, 'L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance', *Studi Medievali* 17.2 (1976) 597-623.

49. Grant, *Secret*, 99.

50. Smith-Lewis, *op. cit.* 20.

uality was at root based on notions of a superior male spirituality that the woman must achieve prior to attaining the asexual ideal.

The sense of hierarchy maintained in the model of ascetic practice was echoed within the institutions of the Church. The Church was unable to create a truly asexual community. One example of this is provided in the life of Eugenia where the saint was offered the abbacy of the monastery in which she was living disguised as a transvestite: 'But the blessed Eugenia declined this, for her conscience admonished her that she was a woman, and it was not fitting that she should be commander (and) governor to the men of God'.⁵¹ The praised female type of humility was a hindrance to a woman in a position of authority within the Church.

Women were not necessarily encouraged by the church in their pursuit of asceticism. In his *letter 262* St. Augustine admonishes Ecdicia for leaving her adulterous husband in order to pursue an ascetic lifestyle: 'I am extremely grieved that you decided to behave toward your husband in such a way that the edifice of continence, which had begun to be raised in him, should have sunk into the wretched ruin of adultery by his slipping from perseverance . . . in his anger at you he was destructive to himself . . . the great evil occurred when you did not treat him with the moderation you ought'.⁵² Augustine is here blaming a wife for the return by her husband to adulterous habits of old. Presumably, the husband, in Augustine's eyes, cannot be held responsible for his own behaviour. It is for the wife to save the marriage, irrespective of her own wishes. This is a somewhat surprising position for Augustine to assume considering his statements elsewhere with regard to marriage: 'Therefore, whoever wishes to prepare himself here and now for that kingdom must hate, not the humans themselves, but those temporal relationships by which this life of ours is supported'.⁵³

Even when a woman had escaped from society, there was no guarantee that the Church would protect her against society's

51. *ibid.*, 13.

52. Clark, *op. cit.* (CSEL 57) 621.

53. *On the sermon on the mount* 1, 15, 40, CCL 35.44.

demands. Euphrosyne's final reason for becoming a transvestite reveals that the convent provided no safe haven for women: 'If it be that I am to go to a convent of women my father will never cease to seek till he has found me, and he will snatch me away by force from the convent on account of my betrothed. But I will put myself into a domicile of men in a place where no one will suspect me'.⁵⁴

The Church treated women within the hierarchical discourse found in the Biblical and patristic texts. The asexual ideal foundered on the model of the male image of the ascetic. There were only female transvestites. It was the woman's asexuality that withered through ascetic practice. In this way the Church did not differ from society in its attitude to the sexes. Not only were women different from men, but they were also the inferior sex. This structure of perceptions was apparent at every level of this society. Chrysostom's analysis of the distinction between the public male space and the private female space was applied by Procopios to the Empress Theodora. For him, the Empress was an intruder into the public realm of the state. It now has to be seen whether Procopios' (and his society's) perception of gender roles is to be found in the imagery of San Vitale.

In the discussion of these mosaics above it was intimated that the image of Theodora offers the greatest 'problems' in understanding these panels. Justinian and Theodora echo each other. They are dressed in imperial purple and are crowned. They are both haloed as a final emphasis on their shared status as imperial figures. Yet Theodora is given a number of extra props to aid the definition of her role in these images: the niche and her height. These additions serve to separate Theodora from the rest of her panel, unlike Justinian who is firmly set within his entourage, sharing their height and clearly participating in the ritual with them.

The differences in the representations of the imperial couple require explanation. The Justinian panel sets its actors against a simple gold background. This use of gold serves to dematerialise both space and time through offering no specific historic reference. The nature of this space is unclear and apart from the named

54. Smith-Lewis, *op. cit.*, 51-2.

figure of Maximian the actors represented can only be identified by their badges of office, thus undermining the specificity of portrayal. The fact that Maximian is the only named party is remarkable given that he is probably the only local figure represented in the panel. As this is the case it seems surprising that he should be singled out for identification. This might be in recognition of his role as the patron of the mosaic, just as Bishop Ecclesius is recognised as the patron of the building in the conch mosaic in this church. But the representation of Maximian is not that of him as a donor. He carries no gift. Rather he is holding a cross which marks him as a participant in the Little Entrance of the Liturgy. By this device he is set into the visual text of the Justinian panel (see below). We must then look for other reasons for this inscribed portrayal of the bishop. Here, I want to suggest that by naming the Bishop the designer of the mosaic has localised, both temporally and spatially, a concept of power. Maximian is then to be understood as forming a bridge between a concept of power and the actual experience of that power.

The concept of power represented in the Justinian panel is that of imperial rule. The figure identified as Justinian can in truth only be read as *an* Emperor, designated by the imperial purple, the crown and the halo. This figure is, in contrast to the Theodora figure, the same height as his companions. The Emperor is surrounded by soldiers, courtiers and priests. These figures serve to represent facets of imperial power: military strength, court based government and theological legitimation.⁵⁵ Pictorially the Emperor is set among his companions. In part this is signalled by Justinian's attributes. He carries a paten and so assumes a priestly role. He wears the military chlamys and sports the tablion of senatorial rank. The Emperor is by these means represented as a composite of his companions. Like them, his distinction is the badge of office he wears. The person of the Emperor is not distinguished from them. This image can be understood less as an image of Justinian and rather more as a representation of the notion of imperial rule. Maximian is the local representative of

55. S. MacCormack, *Art*, 261-63.

this imperial power structure. As a figure recognizable to his congregation he can be understood as having a mediating role in this image. He localises the broader concept of imperial rule and affirms its presence in this recently recaptured capital of the West.

In contrast to the relatively simple structure of the Emperor's image the Theodora panel appears altogether less clear. She is set in a space defined by architectural features. It has been assumed that this space can be understood as an atrium through its fountain and doorway, although it could never be claimed that this has been made explicit. This lack of clarity acts to take the viewer away from a purely literal reading of this image.

The courtiers surrounding Theodora are less well defined than those found in the Justinian panel. The seven women, though lavishly dressed, cannot be distinguished in terms of office. Their male counterparts, however, do not sport the tablion which marks them as public officials. This ought not to be surprising given the 'private' female/'public' male definition of Byzantium. A badged uniform, as a public token of public office, cannot be worn by a female in this society. This exclusion of women from a public role is made explicit in the Theodora panel. The panel is of mixed sex, unlike the all male Justinian panel. It is possible, therefore, to contrast the manner in which the female actors and the male actors are represented. The men are badged. As such they have an identifiable public role. The women have no badge. It is not possible to define them in the same terms as the male figures. Apart from the Empress the women cannot be distinguished from one another in terms of status. The privileging of the male as the performer of a public role is underlined in this panel by the way in which the male actors are showing the way into the darkened doorway to the female actors.

Theodora receives an altogether different treatment from that of her female companions. In the first instance she is presented as a uniformed female. She wears the crown, the purple and the halo of her imperial rank. But in so doing she has broken with the non-uniform, non-public female role in this society. That this has presented the designer of the mosaic with problems appear evident. Mention has already been made of the niche used for Theodora but absent for Justinian, and the additional height of

the Empress. Both of these signal her separation from her retinue.

Before embarking on an analysis of the treatment of Theodora within her panel, a comparison of the clothing of the Emperor and Empress will suggest the framework within which these images are produced. The direct connection between Justinian and Theodora, the imperial uniform, is modified for Theodora. Her crown is far more luxurious than Justinian's. She has strings of pearls hanging down while his has only isolated jewels. Likewise Justinian's does not develop above its basic ring as Theodora's does. The additional luxuriance of Theodora's crown is carried down to the bejewelled shoulder decoration of her cloak. This additional luxuriance can be interpreted as an attempt to 'feminise' the uniform. The additional luxury of Theodora's cloak and crown can be compared with the contrast between the luxury of the female dress and the relative simplicity of the male dress in her panel. Theodora wears a long dress, unlike her female companions she does not wear a shroud. Instead she wears the male (and military) chlamys over her dress. Yet this chlamys is not equivalent to Justinian's. On his the Emperor wears a golden tablion, sharing with his courtiers a badge of office. Theodora, as a woman, cannot wear such a badge. Instead her rank is signalled through alternative means; she has an analogous image of the Magi sewn into the hem of her cloak. The use of this image not only serves to identify the imperial donation represented in the two panels (the donation of the chalice and the paten) with the donations of the Magi, but also unambiguously identifies Theodora as a figure of regal rank.⁵⁶ The common link of the imperial uniform between the Emperor and the Empress is not an equal one.

The inequality in the representation of the Emperor and Empress is given further expression in the use of the niche. The niche serves as a device for separating Theodora from her companions and for distinguishing her as an imperial figure. These are only partial interpretations of this iconography. For one thing

56. A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography* (London 1969) 44-45 discusses the regal nature of the Magi.

Theodora is not alone beneath her niche. To her right is a male figure, to her left is a female figure.

A comparison with the Justinian panel will guide the analysis of the use of the niche in the Theodora panel. It was stated above that Justinian has no niche. This is true. But just as Theodora is represented beneath an enclosed space, so too is Justinian. At the top of his panel are a series of rhomboid shaped turquoise areas. They form a line along the top of the panel with the central area being wedge-shaped. Each of these areas is marked by a black and white flash. Those to the right of the wedge carry this flash in the top right hand corner of their area. Those to the left of the wedge carry this flash in the top left. These markings appear to be crude representations of shading. The effect is to suggest that Justinian and his male companions are situated beneath an enclosing arc.⁵⁷ Theodora and her male and female companions are similarly positioned.

The interpretation of Theodora's niche is dependent upon the companions that she and Justinian have. Justinian is enclosed with all of his male retinue. These represent the different facets of his imperial power. They are the means by which Justinian's office is defined. In the case of Theodora her office cannot have the same means of definition. She is a woman holding public office and therefore a challenge to the public male discourse of this society. In part the difficulties of representing her as such are evidenced in the 'problematic' treatment of Theodora in contrast to the simpler treatment of Justinian. The Empress, the uniformed female, is a transgressor of the sexual discourse prevalent in this society. The transgressing nature of Theodora's role is made explicit in her being situated beneath the niche between a female and a male figure. Her status as a woman cannot be denied, nor can her status as a bearer of office. The designer of the mosaic has therefore made explicit her status as a transgressor of the perceptions of gender in this society through setting her between

57. A visual comparison for this type of shading can be made with the architecture of the panel of SS. Onesiphorus and Porphyrios in the dome of St. George, Thessaloniki. Colour plate in E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine art in the making* (London 1977) II, 52-53. Thanks to Henri Franses for pointing out the nature of this ceiling to me.

a male public office holder and a female without office — the two sides of Theodora.

Theodora's position within the image is expressive of her transgression. As the tallest figure, and the central figure, of her panel she marks an axis. To one side of this axis are males (who take the lead) to the other side females (who follow). She is the boundary dividing the sexes. As a boundary she occupies the paradoxical position of being of both sexes and of neither. The backdrop of this panel maintains this transgressing image of the Empress. Justinian's space is homogenous, if unidentifiable; Theodora's space presents us with the possibilities of both public and private space.⁵⁸ The procession across the panel has come from a recently unveiled entrance. The red, white and blue cloth is attached to an architrave in a similar manner to the fixing of the cloth in the darkened doorway. This cloth has been raised and draped over the columns in order to allow the passage of the Empress' procession. The need to raise the cloth suggests that this is a passage from an enclosed and private area, a women's space in the definition of this society. The procession then moves into an area of display, a niched area designed to emphasise the figure within. Here the Empress is revealed to the public gaze, crossing all the boundaries. The procession will then move into a darkened space, an entrance again suggestive of the private. We are given in Theodora's panel a rare glimpse of the ambivalent and transgressing role performed by the Empress in Byzantine society in the sixth century.

The perception of the Empress outlined above is echoed in a lengthy description of a work of art which portrayed Justinian and Theodora. The description is of the decoration of a room in the Chalke gate of the Imperial Palace in Constantinople.⁵⁹ The image dates to c540, the description to c554. The description comes from Procopius' *Buildings*:

58. For a more traditional discussion of the space in this panel see A. Stojakovic, 'La réalisation des intérieurs sur les mosaïques impériales de San Vitale', *Starinar* 20 (1969) 363-72.

59. Discussion in C. Mango, *The Brazen House* (Copenhagen 1959) 32-24.

On either side is war and battle and many cities are being captured, some in Italy, some in Libya; and the Emperor Justinian is winning victories through his general Belisarius, and the general is returning to the Emperor, with his whole army intact, and he gives him spoils, both kings and kingdoms and all things that are most prized among men. In the centre stand the Emperor and the Empress Theodora, both seem to rejoice and to celebrate victories over both the king of the Vandals and the king of the Goths, who approach them as prisoners of war to be led into bondage. Around them stands the Roman Senate, all in festal mood. This spirit is expressed by the cubes of the mosaic which by their colours depict exultation on their very countenances. So they rejoice and smile as they bestow on the Emperor honours equal to those of God, because of the magnitude of his achievements.⁶⁰

This description returns us to the points made above regarding the perception of gender roles in this society. In his description Procopius indicates that both Justinian and Theodora are present at the centre of the image. They receive the vanquished kings. But in his text Procopius appears disinclined to elaborate on Theodora's role in this mosaic. This is in contrast to his treatment of Justinian. For Procopius it is the Emperor who wins victories and it is the Emperor who receives 'honours equal to those of God, because of the magnitude of his achievements'. The Emperor's success in the male domain of war has brought him the praise of Procopius. The visual presence of the Empress is almost irrelevant to the gender based perception of this imperial image. The imperial mosaics in San Vitale should be set within the context of these attitudes towards the imperial office.

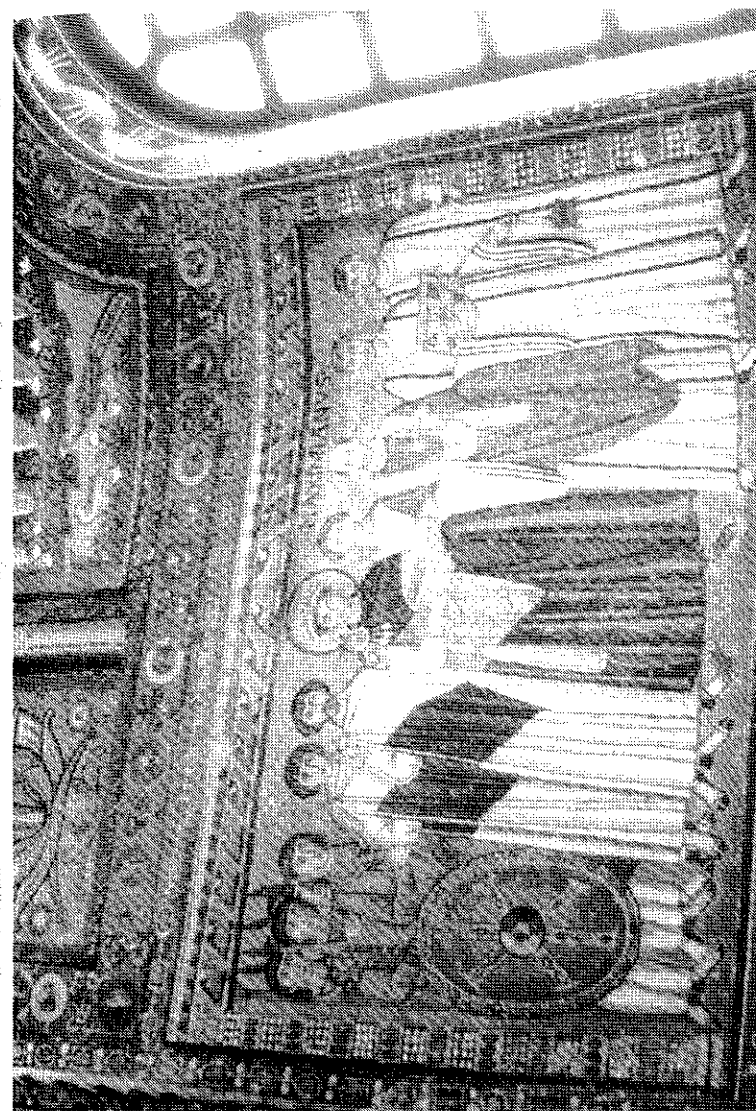
In the San Vitale panels Justinian is represented as the Emperor. He is distinguished from his companions by his uniform. This same uniform, his height and his participation within the First Entrance ritual sets the Emperor among his companions. They are all representatives of a patriarchal understanding of power. The public male role and the male language of power all reinforce this structure. The Empress Theodora transgresses the boundaries of this public male structure. She is a public female and as such contradicts the assumptions held about the imperial office in this society. The Justinian mosaic is a paradigm of imperial representation, fulfilling the expectations of the viewer. The Theodora panel has to compensate for the transgression of

60. Procopius, *Buildings* I.x.16-19. ed./tr. H.B. Dewing (*Loeb* ed. 1971).

Theodora into public affairs which so horrified Procopios. The Empress is dressed in adapted male clothing, she stands beneath a niche to emphasise her importance, she has additional height to distinguish her from her companions. These are male and female. She stands between them. Because of her office she is of both sexes and of neither. They define her two sides, the public and the private, the male and the female. The space in the panel re-affirms this interpretation through the use of curtaining. Theodora has entered from a hidden curtained space, she stands beneath a niche designed to honour her, she will pass on to a second curtained entrance, when once more she will be hidden from sight. Just as the image of Justinian at San Vitale fulfils the norms within which the Emperor was perceived, so too does the image of Theodora fulfil the norms within which the Empress was perceived.

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The Justinian panel, San Vitale, Ravenna



The Theodora panel, San Vitale, Ravenna