


Entry

John II Komnenos (1118–1143)

Maximilian Christopher George Lau ^{1,2} ¹ Department for Economic History, Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo 186-8601, Japan; max.lau@stb.ox.ac.uk² Department for Late Antique and Byzantine Studies, St Benet's Hall, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 3LN, UK

Definition: John II Komnenos was the son of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos and Eirene Doukaina, and brother of Princess Anna Komnene, the author of the *Alexiad*. Born in 1087, he was crowned soon after his fifth birthday as co-emperor with his father, and in 1105, he was married to Piroska Árpád, daughter of King Ladislaus I of Hungary and Adelaide of Rheinfelden. He is principally known for continuing his father's work of stabilising Byzantium after the crises of the eleventh century. This included major wars of defence and conquest in both the Balkans and Anatolia, and especially a major eastern expedition in 1137–1139. During this campaign, he conquered Cilicia, but he was recalled to defend his borders against the Turks before he could make further conquests in Syria and bring the crusader states under his aegis. He died in a hunting accident just before he returned to Syria, with intentions to go to Jerusalem as well. His best-known iconographic representation is a mosaic of him and his wife in the Great Church of Sophia. Whilst there is also an image of him in a contemporary ornate gospel book, his most common representations are found on his many coin issues and seals.

Keywords: royal images; royal iconography; Byzantium; Komnenos; John II Komnenos



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1. Introduction

John II Komnenos was born in the porphyra Chamber of the Great Palace of Constantinople in 1087 to Emperor Alexios I Komnenos and Eirene Doukaina, giving him his frequently used title of *porphyrogennetos*: 'purple-born' (for John II, see: [1]). Alexios had come to power in 1081 after a decade of civil wars and invasions following the defeat of Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes to the Seljuk Turks at the battle of Manzikert, and the loss of Bari, last Byzantine outpost in Italy, to the Normans. Alexios' mother, Anna Dalassene, arranged the marriage between Alexios and Eirene Doukaina—from the rival Doukas family—in order to forge a dominant coalition of leading families in Byzantium, and originally this had also seen Alexios' eldest child, Anna Komnene, betrothed to Constantine Doukas. However, with the birth of John and Constantine's death, Alexios could crown John as a new heir to the Komnenoi, though in rhetorical works John is also referred to as a Komnenos-Doukas. John's sister, Anna, wrote the famous *Alexiad* chronicling Alexios' reign, in which she describes the young John as having dark skin and eyes, and though our images of him do not show this, he is occasionally given the nickname of 'Black-John' in other sources, including by the crusader historian William of Tyre. He is also frequently referred to as Kaloioannes, 'Good-John', in both Greek and non-Greek texts, such as his positive reputation among contemporaries and those that followed him.

As a child, John was given as a hostage to the warriors of the First Crusade outside Constantinople in 1097, to stand surety for his father's good behavior. In 1105, he married Piroska-Eirene Árpád, daughter of King Ladislaus I of Hungary and Adelaide of Rheinfelden, as part of Alexios' plan to bring Hungary into an alliance with Byzantium against the Normans who had invaded the Balkans.

At Alexios' death in 1118, John saw off a challenge to his succession from his mother Eirene, sister Anna and her husband Nikephoros Bryennios, though the seriousness of that

challenge has been debated by historians. To solidify his rule, John led opening campaigns in southwestern Anatolia, and by conquering Laodikeia and Sozopolis, he reopened the land route to Attaleia and brought all of western Anatolia under his aegis, allowing him to crown his own eldest son, Alexios, as co-emperor in 1119. John spent the 1120s mainly in the Balkans, first seeing off a major invasion of Pechenegs and Cumans, which he defeated at the battle of Beroea in 1122, and then dealing with an insurrection by the anti-Byzantine Serb prince Juraj of Raška against the pro-Byzantine King Gradinja, before having to see off a Hungarian invasion led by King Stephen II Árpád. These troubles allowed *Doux* Constantine Gabras of Trebizond to rebel in 1126, and they forced John to concede trading privileges to Venice in the same year; these they had enjoyed under Alexios, but John had not renewed them in 1118, leading to frequent Venetian raids on Byzantine islands from 1122 onwards.

Though John had settled his western provinces by 1130, there was then an attempted coup by his brother, *Sebastokrator* Isaac Komnenos. Isaac and his son fled the capital but then sought to forge a coalition against John amongst his rivals in Anatolia, drawing John back into wars there. Over the course of several campaigns, John subjugated the north central Anatolian region of Paphlagonia, for which he celebrated a Roman Triumph in classical style in Constantinople in 1133. In response to an attack on Seleukeia by Prince Leo of Armenian Cilicia, an erstwhile ally of Isaac's, John invaded Cilicia in 1137 and captured the entire region in a lightning campaign that brought him to the gates of Antioch. Here, he sought to enforce the treaty of Devol whereby the rulers of Antioch were bound to hand over the city to him. By way of negotiation, John and the crusaders campaigned together in Syria against the Muslims, but they were unable to take Aleppo or Shaizar, partially due to the reluctance of the crusaders to fully support John. The emperor was then forced from Antioch by anti-Greek riots that followed his demand that the citadel of Antioch be handed over to him, and then he was recalled to the west by news of renewed Turkish aggression. John spent the years 1139–1142 campaigning once more in Anatolia, where he succeeded in putting down the rebellious Gabras of Trebizond, but he failed to take the city of Neakaisareia from the Turks. In 1142, he returned east to enforce his demands on Antioch, and he made his intentions clear that he planned to travel to Jerusalem as well. Before his designs could be acted upon, John cut his hand whilst hunting in Cilicia; the wound grew infected, and he was obliged to accede to his youngest son Manuel becoming his heir before he died in 1143.

John is otherwise known for co-founding with his wife an immense philanthropic institution associated with a monastery dedicated to Christ Pantokrator ('ruler of all'). His best-known iconographic representation is a mosaic of him, his wife, the *Theotokos* and Christ in the Great Church of Hagia Sophia. Whilst there is also an image of him in a contemporary ornate gospel book, his most common representations are found on his many coin issues and seals (for a general bibliography on Byzantine iconography, see: [2]).

2. The Hagia Sophia Mosaic

The best-known depiction of John today was originally intended only for a very exclusive audience. The Great Church of Hagia Sophia ('Holy Wisdom') had been built by the Emperor Justinian in 537, and until the Ottoman conquest in 1453, it remained the patriarchal cathedral of the imperial capital of Constantinople. The south gallery of the Great Church was reserved for the emperor, his family, and the highest of courtiers to attend services, and it is here we find the mosaic of John, his wife Pirooska-Eirene, and son Alexios, flanking the Virgin and child (Figure 1). We have no information regarding the author, date, or commissioning of this mosaic as it goes unmentioned in any source, though with Alexios being presented as an emperor, this side panel must postdate 1119. The presentation of money and the scroll by John and Eirene to the *Theotokos* and the infant Christ in the Hagia Sophia mosaic likely represent an unknown donation to the Great Church of Hagia Sophia itself, though the imperial couple also collaborated in the foundation of a monastery and major charitable foundation dedicated to Christ Pantokrator [2] (p. 147), [3–5].



Figure 1. John and Pirooska-Eirene, with their son Alexios; mosaic; post 1119; Istanbul, Ayasofya, south gallery. Published in [2] (p. 147), [3–5] (p. 243).

This image emphasises the piety and philanthropy of the imperial family, and it has also been suggested that the frontal representation of the imperial couple in this mosaic emphasises their power and status in comparison with other mosaics where the imperial couple are depicted side on, in deference to Christ or the Holy figure next to them [2] (p. 147), [6]. This is the case for the only mosaic that can be seen alongside it today—that of the eleventh century Empress Zoe Porphyrogenita and her husband Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos—but pilgrim accounts describe that originally, there were multiple imperial portraits along this gallery, below the image of Christ Pantokrator on the central vault [2] (p. 148), [7–9]. Thus, the context of this image mirrored the standard ecclesiastical visual representation of the Pantokrator surrounded by angels. Furthermore, the depiction of Pentecost in the neighbouring vault parallels the mission of the emperor, as the Holy Spirit imparted authority upon the apostles to lead the Church on earth, and emperor continued their work of guiding Christians to the present day [2] (p. 148), [9] (p. 232–237).

The depiction is notable for portraying not only John and his wife but also his son and co-emperor Alexios on the corner wall to the right. This enjambment places an emphasis on their collegial rule and the legitimacy gained through this visual depiction of the continuity of the Komnenian dynasty. Though the inclusion of Christ and the Virgin is an act of piety, it also emphasises the origin of imperial power, and the legitimacy given to John and his son through their favour—the inclusion of saintly haloes around their heads emphasises this further. It has also been suggested that the specific choice of the Virgin and Christ-child (Emmanuel) might be a reference to the birth of the imperial couple's youngest child, Manuel, in 1118, as John succeeded his father Alexios ([10], it has been further noted that there is “a conspicuous expansion of interest in Marian themes and devotion” in the Komnenian period: [11]).

3. The Gospel Book (*Tetraevangelion*, Vat.Urb.gr.2)

This small (7.25 × 4.75 inches) gospel book is lavishly decorated throughout, and its dedication tells us that it was prepared for the family of the emperor of the Romans, though we again have no information as to its author or commissioning (Figure 2) [12,13]. It has traditionally been dated to post-1122 on the basis of this image of John and his son Alexios as co-emperors, though as the dating of Alexios' coronation has more recently been shown to be 1119 due in particular to references in Neapolitan charters, the dating of this book can also be brought earlier ([1,14], first noted in: [15]). As with the mosaic, this image was therefore intended for the intimate audience of the Komnenian inner circle, yet it nevertheless conveys intriguing elements of imperial iconography.



Figure 2. Coronation of John and Alexios by Christ; illumination; post 1119; Vatican Library, Tetraevangelion, Vat.Urb.gr.2, Dedication Image. Published in [2] (p. 147), [3–5] (p. 196).

The collegial rule of John and his son Alexios is once again emphasised as the seated Christ crowns both rulers at once, who stand equally tall under him, and it is notable that the seated Christ is the same figure who will appear on most of John's coinage and seals. Notably, Christ is flanked by personifications of Mercy and Justice, and some commentators have suggested that the personification of 'Mercy' may be based on Piroška-Eirene or one of her daughters, and also that her counterpart 'Justice' may represent the young Alexios' wife (this identification is aided by the image of an imperial figure at the start of the Gospel of Matthew in the same book who recalls both the mosaic and this crowning image, with both commentators agreeing that this image represents Piroška-Eirene [10] (pp. 181–182, 272), [5] (pp. 160–161). Common to the mosaic above, John's coins and seals, the two emperors are otherwise shown crowned, wearing the ceremonial *divitision* and *loros* costume, and they hold the military *labarum* while they stand on a decorated dais.

4. Uncertain and Lost Images

Two decorative stone roundels (Tondi) of unknown provenance have also been claimed to depict John on the basis of facial likeness to the above images (Figure 3, c.f. Figure 1, Figure 2) [15] (DOC, pp. 145–150), [16,17]. Now found at the Campiello Angaran, Venice and Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C., these relief sculptures each depict a full-length frontal figure of an emperor, standing on a footstool and wearing a crown, *divitision* with a crossed *loros* above it, and a mantle fastened on the right shoulder by a plain round *fibula*, while the emperor holds a military *labarum* flag and a *globus cruciger*, symbol of worldly dominion under God. John uses much of this iconography on his coins, so this identification cannot be ruled out; however, Karagiorgou's argument that this specific combination of iconography is more likely to depict the thirteenth century ruler Theodoros II Komnenos-Doukas is convincing. Karagiorgou also makes the point that the iconography of Theodoros' coins owes much to those of John's, so this roundel does testify to the enduring power the image of John II had to shape Byzantine iconography a century later [17] (p. 148, c.f. Coins, below).



Figure 3. Unknown Emperors; Figural Roundels; unknown date and provenance; now found at the Campiello Angaran, Venice (L) and Dumbarton Oaks (R). Published in [15] (DOC, p. 149), [16,17] (Figures 1 and 2).

Furthermore, there is a relationship between this image and a lost image of John, mentioned as part of the decoration of new living quarters in the Blachernai Palace of Constantinople, commissioned by John himself shortly after the death of his father in 1118. A poem by the court doctor Nikephoros Kallikles describes the decoration of these living quarters as including depictions of John's father Alexios defeating Normans, Pechenegs and Turks, followed by an image of the deceased Alexios and then the living John, mourning but with the sun [15] (DOC, p. 149), [18,19]. Solar imagery is common to Roman imperial imagery back to antiquity, but John is specifically compared to the sun in multiple court orations and other poems by the pre-eminent court rhetor, Theodore Prodromos (see in particular: Theodore Prodromos Poems I, IV, V, VI, IX, X, XI, XII, XIV, XV, XIX In [20]). John's iconography therefore appears to have drawn on this ancient tradition for at least one lost work, and possibly others. Indeed, this reuse of solar imagery may have contributed to the development of the later Byzantine ceremony of *prokypsis*, which had as its focus the ceremonial appearance of the emperor as light, in an evolution of the ecclesiastical *kathisma* ceremony [21–23].

5. Coins

John's reign had three indictional tax cycles in which new coins were produced: 1118–1122, 1122–1137 and 1137–1143, and coins were produced at the two imperial mints of Constantinople and Thessaloniki [15] (DOC, pp. 1, 11, 30, 39, 41–47, 96–128, 181–274, esp. 245, 251, 253–254), (DOC, p. 97; [24] (pp. 48–49, 57, 107–108), [25–34]. In 1092, John's father Alexios had reformed Byzantine coinage after many years of devaluation, but John further refined this system: he introduced more middle denomination coins that enabled a greater amount of economic exchange than previously, and consequently, there is a great variety of coins on which to see his iconography [15] (DOC, pp. 169, 255–256, 259–260. On imperial costume and its iconography on coins in general, see: pp. 143–176. Images on Plate IX). A noticeable trend in the iconography of his gold coins in particular is that they appear to evidence John's growing ambitions, which could bear relation to these coins being minted for military expenditure.

Most of John's coinage displays an enthroned Christ on the obverse, where he is dressed in the typical iconographic classical clothing of the *chiton* and the *himation*. Christ has a cruciform halo, holds a gospel book, and lifts a hand in blessing (Figures 4–8). In John's lower denomination coins, Christ is either depicted standing, or we only see his head and shoulders. Some variant coinage displays an enthroned Virgin and Christ Child (Figure 9), or some coins from Thessaloniki display the head and shoulders of St Demetrios, warrior saint and patron of the second city of the empire (Figure 10).



Figure 4. First Indiction Hyperpyron Nomisma, 1118–1122; impression on gold; New York; 1b.1. Whittemore Collection. Published at [15] (*DOC*, pp. 256–259, 260–261. Images on Plate VIII).



Figure 5. Second Indiction Hyperpyron Nomisma, 1122–1137; impression on gold; Amsterdam; 2.2 Peirce 1948 from Schulman i.30. Published at [15] (*Ibid*, pp. 261–274. The issues from the mint at Thessalonike have St Demetrios, the patron saint of the city, while those from Constantinople have St George. Images on Plates VIII and IX).



Figure 6. Third Indiction Hyperpyron Nomisma, 1137–1143; impression on gold; Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.; 3b.3 Shaw 1947. Published at [15] (*Ibid*, pp. 261–274. The issues from the mint at Thessalonike have St Demetrios, the patron saint of the city, while those from Constantinople have St George. Images on Plates VIII and IX).



Figure 7. *Aspron Trachy Nomisma*, 1118–1143; impression on electrum; Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.; 8b.2 Schindler 1960 (Kallai i.33). Published at [15] (*Ibid*, pp. 261–274. The issues from the mint at Thessalonike have St Demetrios, the patron saint of the city, while those from Constantinople have St George. Images on Plates VIII and IX).



Figure 8. Aspron Trachy Nomisma, 1118–1143; impression on electrum; Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.; 8e.1 Peirce 1948 (H. Pl. 10.5). Published at [15] (Ibid, pp. 261–274. The issues from the mint at Thessalonike have St Demetrios, the patron saint of the city, while those from Constantinople have St George. Images on Plates VIII and IX).

Beginning with his gold coinage (*Hyperpyron Nomisma*), his first issue (1118–1122, Figure 4) depicts John in a ceremonial *loros* and *divitision* costume on the reverse, holding a patriarchal cross with the Virgin Mary. The hand of God also hovers above his head, and John holds in his other hand the *anexikakia* (a silk covered scroll filled with dust to symbolise humility) [15] (DOC, pp. 256–259, 260–261. Images on Plate VIII). These coins emphasise his divinely ordained succession and his co-rule with the *Theotokos*, along with his personal humility, but his next two issues display a progression from this humble piety.

His second issue (1122–1137, Figure 5) drops both the hand of God and the patriarchal cross in favour of John holding the military *labarum*, and he is crowned directly by the Virgin while still holding the *anexikakia*, while his third (1137–1143, Figure 6) shows him being not only crowned by the Virgin, but this time John holds a *globus cruciger* [24–34]. John's earlier humility was first militarised and later (as he set out on his eastern expedition to Cilicia and Syria) replaced with an emphasis on the universal rule assigned him by the Virgin.

In addition to these major coin issues, there was also a commemorative coin or medal produced by Alexios, assumedly in 1092, to celebrate John's coronation as infant: it displays a beardless John in imperial regalia and holding the gospels on one side, and his imperial parents Alexios and Eirene on the other, much like a modern commemorative coin (since it not covered by a major coin catalogue, Magdalino has made the suggestion to me that it may be a commemorative medal rather than a true coin [35,36]).



Figure 9. First Indiction Aspron Trachy Nomisma, 1118–1122; impression on billon; Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.; B.11.1 Bertelè 1956 (H. Pl. 11.3). Published at [15] (DOC, pp. 224, 226, 228, 231, 234, images on Plates VIII and IX), [37].



Figure 10. First Indiction Tetraton, 1118–1122; impression on copper; Oxford; HCR53126. Published at [15] (DOC, pp. 224, 226, 228, 231, 234, 248–249, 264–267. Images on Plates VIII–X), [37].

John's lower denomination coins evidence signs of his ambition even earlier on. On John's much produced electrum coins (silver/gold alloy with c.75% silver, known as *Aspron Trachy Nomismata*), we find John holding a patriarchal cross or the *labarum* with the martial saints George or Demetrios on the obverse, with the saint dressed in armour and with a drawn sword in his left hand (Figures 7 and 8 respectively) [15] (DOC, pp. 224, 226, 228, 231, 234, images on Plates VIII and IX; DOC, pp. 224, 226, 228, 231, 234, 248–249, 264–267. Images on Plates VIII–X, this image at <https://hcr.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/collection/4?page=65>) (accessed on 10 February 2022), [37]. On some versions we the patriarchal cross is depicted on three steps, drawing on iconography thought to relate to the cross that Emperor Theodosius II (408–450) erected on Christ's crucifixion site of Golgotha, which was common on Byzantine coins and seals in the few centuries after him (Figure 7).

In John's billon coinage (6–10% silver to copper alloy), John stands alone in a short military cloak, the *sagion*, rather than the *loros*, holding both a *labarum* and an *anexikakia* or *globus cruciger* (with earlier coinage displaying the *anexikakia* and later coinage the *globus cruciger*), while the obverse shows the Virgin and Christ child (Figure 9) [15,37].

On John's lowest denomination coinage, the tetaraton (copper), we see either a standing John with *labarum*, crown, and military cloak, akin to Figure 9, or his head and shoulders, as in Figure 10, that also displays the head and shoulders of St Demetrios on the obverse [15,37].

6. Seals

John's seals portray an enthroned Christ on the obverse and John himself on the reverse (Figure 11) [38,39]. The iconography of Christ is the same as John's coinage, showing Christ with a cruciform halo, and the standard iconographic classical clothing of the *chiton* and the *himation*. In all known examples, John is depicted standing, wearing a *loros* and crown, and he is holding in his left hand a *globus cruciger*, and in his right, the military *labarum*. These are similar to the iconography of John's coinage, though no seal has exactly the same combination of regalia as a specific coin. Though many surviving seals are in poor condition, from those in a better state we can see that John's titles are often more prominent than the coins (which, as shown above, usually display a simple ω as a short form of *Ioannes*, perhaps with one title). The standard formula appears to have been $\text{Ἰωάννης δεσπότη τῷ πορφυρογεννήτῳ}$, drawing on John's status as *porphyrogenetos* 'born in the purple' and *despotes*, lord or master, though this is given in shortened form.



Figure 11. Seal of John; Zacos Collection, Geneva; Inv. CdN 2004-582. Published in [38,39].

7. Conclusions

Though John's dynastic project is marked in his portrait in both Hagia Sophia and the gospel book, neither of these was a public image in the same way as his coinage or seals. The proximity of his wife and son in these images may therefore have been emphasised to this highest of court audiences, which might have included some potential rivals from within the imperial family, but to the wider world it was only John and his personal iconography that was presented.

Turning to these coins, seals and perhaps other images that did have a wider audience, any emperor of the latter centuries of Byzantium had most of a millennium's worth of

iconography to choose from to emphasise his specific ideological program. John's use of the *labarum* and *globus cruciger* had been common in the iconography of his predecessors, but far less so was the *anexikakia*, the cross on steps, solar imagery, and indeed the hand of God in addition to the *Theotokos*, Christ, St. George, or St. Demetrios. This diversity in iconography is also marked, as is the progression on his gold coinage from emphasising John's piety, humility, and legitimacy to a more confident assertion of universal authority. It appears that in the earlier parts of John's reign, he was far more anxious to emphasise the former, and he drew on a great diversity of iconography to do so. This may reflect the challenge he received at his accession from his mother Eirene Doukaina and sister Anna Komnene, followed by the attempted coup of his brother, Isaac, in 1130. Far more secure in later years, John emphasised his claim to universal rule with his iconography as he conquered Cilicia and sought to do the same to Syria and the crusaders of the Levant. This confidence he handed on to his successor Manuel, whose iconography follows John's in many respects. It is also a testament to John's iconographical program that one of the first emperors who ruled from Nicaea after the fall of Constantinople, John III Vatatzes, minted gold coinage that directly copied the iconography of John II [15] (DOC, pp. 475–477; Papadopoulou, Coinage, p. 183). This, together with the possibility of the roundels being those of Theodore II Komnenos-Doukas, evidences the effectiveness and longevity of both John's reign and its accompanying iconography.

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